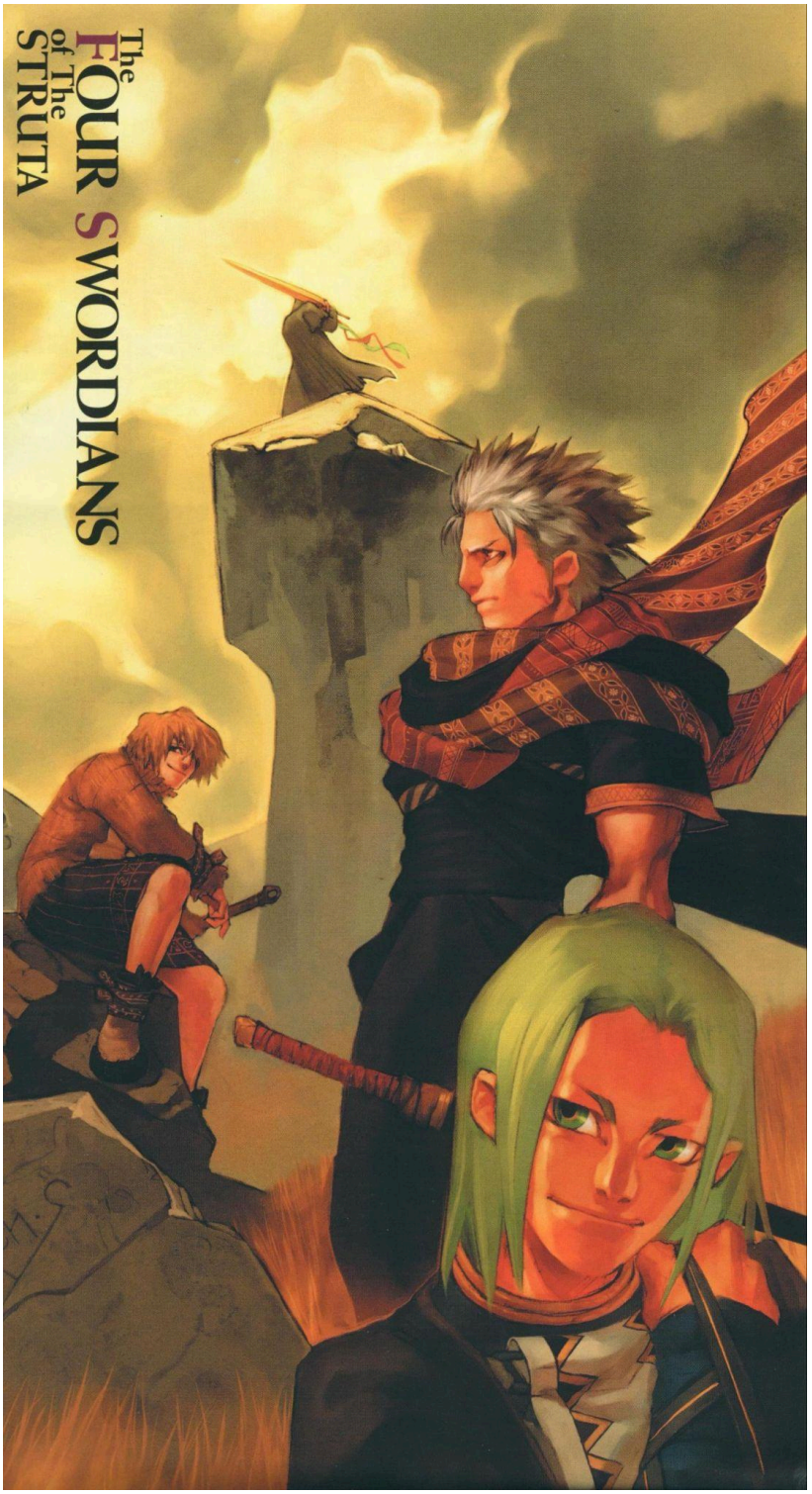

Evergrace
Those who Bear the Crest
[ENG translation]

Written by Mie Takase
Illustrated by Ken Sugawara

This is a prequel light novel to Evergrace, a series of two dress-up action RPGs made by Fromsoftware.

If you'd like to read the original text of this light novel, please check out my scans here.

If you're looking for the translations/scans of the Evergrace novelization by Kaeko Shimomura, please refer to this page.

As always, all translations are supported by six years of Chinese school, two semesters of High School Japanese, and Jisho, and other Japanese sentence example sites. When I really can't decipher the meaning, DeepL was used first, then my friend Saria to verify, then Saria's mom in which she said the novel was mid.

They sure are bearing that Crest alright!

Thank you to Erika, Cookie (?!), Fufu, and Reppa who helped with wording.
Special thanks to Saria for helping with proofreading, and Saria's Mom who helped Saria who helped me with proofreading. Feel free to check out the proofreading edits by opening comments!
And thank you to all friends and supporters over the years. Please enjoy!

Contact me at pearhi@hotmail.com or https://taptroupe.neocities.org/, for any inquiries, questions, or corrections.

Table of contents:

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

A special postscript conversation
between Masanori Takeuchi and Mie Takase

EVERGRACE
Those who bear the Crest
One of the four swordsmen. He is the son of the family that took Darius in, as their fathers were longtime acquaintances. He grew up alongside Darius, as if a pair of brothers.
Ruyan
リャナ
A girl who once lived nearby Darius many years ago, acting much like an older sister to him. She was swept up in the outburst of energy from Darius's Crest, as thus her current whereabouts are unknown
Sharline
シャルアミ
The leader of an elite group within the Morean army, fighting against the logging of the Billiana Forest. She is somehow related to the assassination of Darius's parents, and harbors a personal grudge for him.
Lestea
レステア
Felkin
フェルク
A young man hailed as "The Hope of Solta," and is one of the four swordsmen. His father is the current leader of Solta, as thus he has a deeply imprinted hatred for Morea.
Darius
ユテラルド
The protagonist of the story. He is one of the four swordsmen of Solta, and bears the "cursed mark" on the back of his right hand, known as the Crest. When he was young, his parents were murdered by assassins from Morea, and lived in Seclue from then on.
A mercenary hailing from another continent, travelling from place to place. Currently, he is employed by Solta to fight against the Morean army. Owing to his strength, he quickly earned the title as one of the four swordsmen.
Saris
アルフトアイン
CHARACTERS

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Chapter 1

For a moment, the flame was dyed a glowing green, as if a precious jewel. And in the next moment, it settled back to its original colour of orange.

This was, in part, due to Felk dumping alcohol into the fire. The alcohol, extracted from Yoguru fruit, made the flames jump and dance in vivid green with every drop. Nobody knew just how many bottles Felk had already poured into the campfire, but he obviously found it rather entertaining to do so.

“Ain’t that some waste of booze...”

Slurred out the voice of some drunkard from somewhere, but it most certainly did not reach the ears of a certain someone. Perhaps Felk just wanted to kill time—he was somewhat of a non-drinker.

In a dried-out clearing were several campfires glowing brightly under the night sky. Not a single sound of insects, where the fruits of the land had long fallen into disarray, was the Solta army setting up camp. Their lively, bright site jutting out against the vast expanse of wasteland.

Like little dots, scores of small campfires were glowing—no more than 20, at most. Around these fires were large tents set up, as well. But, the amount of soldiers fast asleep in their tents were most likely in the single digits. Everyone was simply on the high of nearing their final battlefield, the heat of their excitement much like the fires they gathered around.

Food and alcohol were in abundance. There were men who sat around the fire, singing songs of pure gibberish with glowing red faces to match. And, there were men who simply sprawled out on the ground, doing whatever they wanted.

But even amidst all this were tiny little groups of people having spats over tiny little issues. Perhaps Felk wasn’t the only one—in a sense, everyone had just a bit too much free time on their hands.

“...Maybe, we ought to be just a little bit more careful?”

Ruyan said with an uneasy smile on his face, dodging a flying sake cup.

As for Darius, who seemed to have neither heard or reacted to that remark, he was simply staring into the campfire. Sitting at that very spot made all the ruckus seem so very far away, somehow.

Ruyan glanced over at that very rigid profile, and let out a small sigh.

Even Felk stopped playing with his boozed-up fire and turned over, too. He simply stuck out his tongue.

“Don’t bother. No one’s gonna listen to a stick-in-the-mud like you.”

“Well, even so...”

Ruyan straightened up a bit and turned his head slightly to the slopes in the south, eyes narrowed in his focus.

The plains gently sloped downwards, leading down into what felt like a vast sea of land. And, if one focused hard enough, they could see specks of light upon that vast sea, illuminated like lures on a fishing boat.

But of course, those were no boats.

The lights that sprouted from those dried-out lands were from another settlement, where people gathered and lived.

What used to be there was a village that could hold its own against Solta's struggle for power. Now, thanks to its battered crops and the ongoing war, the village of Morea was mere steps away from total collapse.

The hate between the two villages was a history as old as time, with roots just as deep. And what loomed in the far-reaching backdrop of the two villages, the reason for such a history, was the Billiana Forest.

The Billiana, sometimes referred to as the Mother of All Things, made up this sacred forest. Far different from the wastelands that populated the continent, the Billiana Forest was lush with green leaves as far as the eye could see. This incredulous abundance was regarded in different ways, however—two villages, two classes of thought, two conflicting ideas. Where the Moreans placed more and more faith into the forest, the Soltans steadily grew in their hate towards it.

The forest is stealing away all the power of the continent, and that is precisely why our lands are becoming more and more fragile—so thought the people of Solta, and began clearing the forests for the promise of creating more fertile land. Of course, Morea strongly opposed such a thing, and so began a conflict that spilt blood on both sides of the fight.

Solta, Morea, and two other villages made up the coalition of Fontraile, in hopes for a unified government. But, with this conflict, Morea immediately isolated itself and quickly withdrew from Fontraile. And, as the battles became more and more aggressive, Morea's defeats stacked up one after another.

The group of soldiers that Ruyan belonged to were aiming to get rid of the last remnants of Morea's army that existed, and thus set up camp on such a slope. Whatever soldiers were left in that closed-off village was a trifling matter. If they could strike them down, this long and arduous war could finally come to an end.

However, no matter how many times they went on the offence, it always seemed that the leader on the opposing side was always, always one step exhaustingly ahead of them.

Fire, water, boulders, even the wind, anything—Morea's soldiers seemed to know how to use anything at their disposal for their traps, and always at the perfect time. These didn't result in any devastating blows or casualties to the Soltan army, however, but the blow to soldier morale was far greater.

As constant as the chirping of a particularly bothersome insect, was this thorn in the army's side that slowly grew larger and larger. And it threatened to bring any momentum the army had to a screeching halt.

This time as well, if they charged ahead, just what kind of traps would be awaiting them? It was nighttime, the opponent's base was just closeby, no matter what they did they'd be at a disadvantage.

There was no need to dash in recklessly. Now was the time to prepare, carefully and thoroughly, for there was plenty of time until daybreak came.

Victory was in their reach, but what came with it was a sense of laxness, but what could anyone do? After all, fighting was exhausting.

Even Ruyan, who couldn't shake off his feelings of unease, knew very well that the course of this war was not going to suddenly change, not now, not this late into it.

History was going to be made soon, with a huge turning point coming into view. The four villages would stand side by side, looking into the new era of a huge, unified government. No matter how persistent the last remnants of the Morea army were, there was nothing that could stop the huge wave of history that was coming.

"They oughta just surrender now if they know what's good for 'em—they're fighting a losing war. Stubborn-ass bastards."

Felk said, as he took a seat beside Ruyan.

He had to be about three years older than Ruyan, at most, something like 22 that year. But with an upturned nose, a loud mouth, he felt more like a little boy than an adult. Despite all that, it was undeniable that sitting before Ruyan was the only child, the son of Solta's current leader, and in the dawn of the new unified government, that Felkin was surely going to be one of its leaders as well. But, well, as for right now, he hardly looked or acted the part.

Not every ugly duckling grew up into a beautiful swan—sometimes they'd grow up into an unruly young man.

Ruyan smiled.

"It'll all be over soon, right?"

"Yeah."

Felk raised the cup in his hand, gesturing to Ruyan with a hint of pride. As Ruyan returned the gesture of cheers, Felk ever-so-slightly dipped his tongue into the alcohol he was so wary of. His face scrunched up dramatically.

"We'll rush them at daybreak."

"Well then, I do hope everyone won't be too drunk by then..."

"We're not an army of idiots, here. Come daylight, we'll be ready for battle, which is why we're recharging ourselves now."

Felk spoke, though his words weren't exactly assured.

Ruyan looked around at the clamour of men, and gave a small shrug.

"If that's what you think..."

"Oy, why're you so damn depressing? Don't tell me *his* personality's rubbing off on you, now."

Felk stuck his finger out at Darius.

Ruyan quickly grabbed Felk by the wrist and lowered his hand. Darius, who perhaps didn't hear it, or perhaps didn't care for such dumb behaviour, didn't react to it either way.

Ruyan called out to Darius.

"Are you going to rest, soon? You must be tired."

Darius turned his eyes up just slightly, but no other response came. Ruyan could see a hint of annoyance flare up in the eyes of his companion, and quickly clamped his own mouth shut.

He must be restless. But it makes sense.

There's no one else here who's been waiting for this day more—hoping for the destruction of Morea, more than Darius. Rather than bother with all the ridiculous displays around him, he'd much rather rush ahead into battle already, no doubt.

But, Darius wasn't the kind of person that people easily got along with, and his stubbornness occasionally got him in trouble with his fellow soldiers. He was still a superb swordsman, no doubt, but even so, this wasn't a battle he would win all on his lonesome.

Felk looked at Darius, and blew air out his nose quite rudely before turning his face away.

Looking away from the depressing scene, Felkin turned his attention to another person—in fact, another person he hardly got along with at all.

Felk sat alongside him, and decided this time he'd start up the conversation.

"Yo, Saris. Whatcha up to with that dangerous thing whipped out?"

Without looking up, the raven-haired swordsman curled his lips up ever so slightly.

Perched on his knee was a large sword. The flames of the nearby fire reflected a dull orange against the huge width of his blade.

For a moment there, Ruyan felt the strings of curiosity pluck at him, too, and turned his attention away as well.

Ruyan was a superb swordsman in his own right, enough to be praised as one of the Four Swordsman. So, of course he had confidence in his skills, his swordsmanship, yet still. There was something extraordinary about Saris, and the way he could swing his huge blade so effortlessly on the battlefield.

And just like minutes before, Saris silently placed that blade back in his hands, and continued to methodically polish the rust off it. He was always detached from the rest of the crowd, but even more than that, it was like he was above them all, with an emotionless facade to match.

He wasn't like Darius, whose irritation and impatience to go into battle was clearly on his face. Saris looked like he was right at home, relaxed as he polished his precious sword to perfection.

"What, you're not satisfied enough letting that huge thing swing around all the time? What a menace you are."

Felk teased, but in a rare turn of events, Saris responded in earnest.

"And here I thought polishing one's weapon was a normal thing to do. I'm sure you know the battle isn't over yet."

Thankfully, none of the troublemakers around Saris caught wind of his biting remark, delivered in his low, deep voice.

Though Felk felt threatened, of course.

"Someone's feisty, eh? Looking for any chance you can get to swing that broadsword around, eh?"

"You sound like someone who's already won the battle."

Saris lifted his sword to the flames, carefully inspecting the condition of the blade.

"I've never let that kind of thinking get to my head."

"What, you think that some miracle is gonna turn this war on its head, and suddenly we're all gonna be losing this?"

"Obviously not. No matter how this plays out, Morea's destruction is all but unavoidable. But, well..."

Saris narrowed his eyes at Felkin. On his gruff, impenetrable face arose a wry smile.

"This war may be decided, but not its casualties. What's the point of winning the battle if you're killed before you can celebrate, now?"

Felk looked dumbstruck. *If you die out there*—someone like him, this cheerful young man, going into battle like usual and *dying?* It seemed that the thought of such a thing had never crossed his mind.

Saris simply turned his attention back to his sword once more.

"Morea's a tough one. Their beliefs are carved so deep into their hearts that they'll never stop fighting. Especially now that they're driven so close to their deathbeds. No matter how outnumbered they are, they're never to be taken lightly."

Felk's face turned red in a flash.

"We've—"

His voice was shaking now, rising to a shout.

"Are you saying that we've been playing around this whole time, is that it? What about *our* reasons to fight? You can say whatever you damn well please, but we've not once for a moment forgotten why we're here. Someone like you, you outsider, you would never in a thousand years understand just what we've all been through, you, you.....!"

"Felk!"

Ruyan stepped in to stop them.

Any more friction and it would spread to the surrounding groups as well. It would do no one good for a commotion to flare up before a huge battle.

Felk must've sensed it, too. Even though his shoulders still trembled with the words still unspoken, he forced them all back down, turning his fiery eyes away.

As for Saris, he simply placed his sword back in his hands, and went back to his business as if nothing had happened. Ever so slightly, Ruyan turned his eyes to Saris's profile.

The black-haired warrior clearly stood out among the army. After all, he was a hired mercenary working for money.

Everyone else in the army either hailed from Solta or Seclue, with their own multitudes of reasons to fight buried deep in their chests. What Felk shouted was true. The destruction of Morea, burning down the Billiana Forest, and someday soon, the unified government standing proudly towards a brighter future. That was a reason to fight.

Saris was different. Once the fighting was over and he got his pay, he wouldn't stick around to watch a new country come into existence. He'd be going where the wind takes him, probably.

Ruyan couldn't fathom Saris's way of living. But he could still respect his skills as a warrior, and took Saris's words of preparation to heart.

This war wasn't over. And it wasn't just about winning this final battle, either. It was about keeping injuries to a minimum, that no soldiers were to die in vain. Ruyan stiffened up in his seat.

Darius got up.

Wordlessly, he headed towards the sleeping tents. Ruyan got up from his spot and followed suit.

"Going to sleep?"

"Yeah."

"Ah. I should get going, too."

"Ruyan."

Darius lifted his right hand, rubbing the back of it with his other hand, soundlessly.

His right hand was wrapped in cloth, covering bare skin. Nobody in the army knew what was hidden underneath those wrappings.

No one, except for Ruyan.

Looking down as he rubbed his right hand, Darius whispered in a muffled voice.

".....I really couldn't care less."

"Huh?"

"As long as I can see the destruction of Morea with my own eyes. I'm ready to die anytime."

Ruyan froze in his tracks. Darius continued on, walking onwards to the large sleeping tents assigned to the four swordsmen.

Ruyan could only watch Darius's back shrink further into the distance. Standing there, dumbfounded.

Once more, he was reminded of the darkness that clung so deeply to his childhood friend.

After a while, Ruyan headed back to where Felkin and the others were. He just couldn't bring himself to fall asleep in the same tent as Darius.

The soldiers' bountiful feast looked like it could go on forever. As Ruyan watched closely for a good time to join in, a voice rang out in the midst of it all.

"Everyone! The time is at hand for our final battle. Come tomorrow morning, just as the sun rises, we too will rise up and fight. That's why I want everyone here to rest well tonight. Just don't get too drunk!"

"You think this much would actually get us drunk?!"

The self-proclaimed heavy drinkers in the crowd of men laughed raucously. And as the loud cries of *More booze, more drinks!* intermingled with the laughter, not even Ruyan could go against it.

Although Ruyan was probably one of the youngest in the army, he was respected highly by the other soldiers. Though he was one of the four swordsmen alongside Darius, Felkin, and Saris, he contributed the most towards the Solta army as a whole. Not only was he the most amiable of the four, but Ruyan was a thorough thinker. The other soldiers couldn't help but gather around him.

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After some time, the number of campfires gradually shrank until there were only two left. In time, the men slowly dragged each other back to their tents to rest.

"Ruyan."

It was Felk's voice.

"Oh, yes?"

Felk outstretched a finger towards the direction of Morea.

Ruyan focused his eyes towards that way.

The lights of the village had gone out, save for a few key points. And from there came a single torchlight, facing towards the way of their camp.

Ruyan tensed up. Recalling from his past experiences, this was a classic tactic by the army of Morea. Even if he had no idea what attack was going to come up, *something* was going to happen very, very soon.

"Go wake everyone up, now."

As soon as Ruyan said that, the light suddenly started to advance forwards, as if it knew it had been spotted. Felk made a sprint for the tents.

Suddenly, Ruyan noticed that Saris had taken a stand beside him.

"What... Is that...?"

Ruyan turned his eyes up Saris's way, hoping for a clear answer.

The mercenary simply gripped his huge sword, shaking his head.

"Looks like a cow. And it's got a torch tied to its horns. That's what's probably driving it mad."

"But, why? Did they want to try and trample us with a herd of cows?"

However, there were no rumbles underfoot—no such signs of any stampede coming closer. Under the farthest reaches of the moonlight, it seemed almost certain that there was just a single animal coming their way.

Ruyan was dumbfounded.

"What were they thinking? Letting a single animal loose like that, just what..."

Suddenly, Saris turned around so quickly that it startled Ruyan.

"What's going on?"

"Run."

"Huh?"

Ruyan blinked.

"...Saris?"

The mercenary looked back. His face had not a shred of seriousness. Rather, it was as if he was stifling back laughter.

"You'd better start running if you know what's good for you. Especially if you want to keep that pretty face of yours."

"...What?"

"That cow's bringing company along with it. A huge swarm of black wasps from the Billiana Forest."

"Wha..."

Ruyan's eyes widened as he scrambled to look over at the cow's direction once more.

It was difficult to see anything wrapped in such darkness. But, following Saris's words, he could feel something out there.

Something angry.

Something that buzzed so intensely that the air around it felt like it was trembling.

Something that was coming their way.

And at that moment, Ruyan froze. The inside of his head was pure blank. This went far, far beyond what he learned about fighting a war.

The black wasps of the Billiana Forest were ferocious insects that could grow as big as one's pinky finger. And if anything made them angry, they'd swarm together and strike down their foes with sharp needles. The needles didn't contain poison, so it wasn't a big deal to get stung—but the stung area would develop into reddened hives, and then leave behind a slow, throbbing pain.

As soon as he realised just what was the curtain of black behind that single cow, Ruyan could only let out a miserable scream.

"Run away!"

And at that moment, the Solta army fell into chaos.

What followed the ox, eyes bloodshot, was a swarm of wasps that filled the air...

There were simply not enough emergency rations of medicine to go around.

It wasn't like there were scores of gravely injured soldiers lying on their deathbeds, at least. Just scores of hives on the bodies of the soldiers who started running too late. Their hands and legs were bound, in fact, lest they ceaselessly scratched themselves in anguish.

Even looking at them was painful. *A unique kind of personal hell*, the onlookers thought.

Ruyan got away with only two bites on his arm, but the throbbing pain of the hives kept him on edge.

These tiny little bites were precisely the kind of thing that the Morea army would do. They weren't grave, mortal injuries. But they chipped away at your psyche, bit by bit.

Ruyan and the others were eventually able to get away from the swarm of black wasps, if one could call "running around in a frenzy" a retreat. Under the command of the four swordsmen, their shining squadron had garnered much praise for their war efforts, but this incident was enough to reduce them all to nothing more than laughingstocks.

The sky was now bright with the morning sun. Somehow or another, they managed to fight off every last bit of the wasps, and the tents were pitched up once more, but what remained of the soldiers' wills to fight had evaporated like the night sky.

If we took up our arms now, and then still lost against Morea, I think it'd still be salvageable. Even if we were to suffer a huge amount of injuries—

No, if we suffered more casualties, it would directly correlate with our enemy's morale. We can't let them think they're going to win this.

But, there's no way we're going to win with how our own morale is, right now. We're all still in a daze, no one's even looking at each other, let alone talking... Or cursing at each other. Just a few hours ago, the atmosphere was so rowdy and foolish... It's almost as if that was a dream.

The remainders of the Morea army, previously backed into a corner, had taken advantage of the chaos and fled the area. The village of Morea itself was abandoned, leaving nothing left but to chase a vagrant pack of soldiers. And a moving target was much, much harder to strike.

It was like catching a wasp—an ill-timed metaphor—and thinking it was finally crushed between your fingers, only for it to escape at the last moment.

No one would ever have a full night's sleep after that.

Not with one's senses picking up the slightest thing.

The quietest, most irritating, softly buzzing sound, flying all around the room.

In fact, a metaphor like that was quite reminiscent of...

"That goddamn bitch."

Felk spat, words dripping with venom.

Among the crowd of fatigued soldiers with heads dropped low, Felk was the only person with enough vitality to open up his big mouth. Even if he had a swollen sting on his face that left him barely able to keep his left eye open.

"I'm gonna fuckin' kill her. She's done nothing but dirty tricks after the other!"

With that, Felk kicked the tree he had been leaning against. His face scrunched up in pain immediately. Nobody even bothered to laugh at him.

That bitch, or at least that was what Felkin called her, was the leader of the Morea army's last remnants. A woman by the name of Lestea.

She had to be around Ruyan or Darius's age. But, when Ruyan watched her from far away, she seemed like a young girl, her fluttering red hair burning brightly. With a stiff, tall collar and men's clothing, she looked undoubtedly appropriate to command the men under her—even more than Ruyan, in many ways.

Female soldiers weren't an ordinary sight, to be clear. Whatever happened behind the scenes that led to her position in the army, no one knew. But, it was hard to imagine she wasn't anything else but a "little missy" living a perfectly normal life before Solta and Morea broke out into conflict.

But, this one single girl was enough to send the four famous swordsmen into a dizzying mess. For someone like Felk, it was only natural to be furious.

Suddenly, Felkin spun his head around, glaring daggers at Saris's way. The mercenary couldn't hold in his amusement anymore, stifling the faintest laugh he could. But, it was a laugh that sent a loud enough signal at Felk.

"Why, what's so funny?!"

"Oh, nothing."

"Really? Because I coulda sworn you were laughing at me!"

"I was just thinking how precious it was for you to whine about what's fair and not, is all."

"You wanna fucking go?!"

Felk sprang up with a flash of rage, to which Ruyan hastily tried to pin him back down.

Saris simply laughed again.

"It's exactly like I said. Morea's strong. Lestea knows how to fight her fights. If she went at us fair and square, it'd be game over for all of them. Pissing you off is the best she and all her troops can do."

Of course, even Felk understood all this already—or, well, he was supposed to. Felkin could only choke his reply back through a set of grinding teeth.

Ruyan spoke.

"But why in the world would she want to prolong such a useless battle like this? To what ends? There's no reason for both our villages to keep struggling like this. Morea should know by now just how futile it is for them, how small their chances are of turning things around..."

"They have a reason to fight."

Saris's answer was curt.

Ruyan loosened his hands around Felk, and turned his head to face the direction of Morea.

There was already no one there. And just for safety's sake, the soldiers they sent out to the village for reconnaissance reported nothing, either. Not even a stray kitten.

Destruction was coming. Both for Morea and the Billiana Forest they so fiercely protected. All that remained was a game of cat-and-mouse with a single remaining battalion.

And even though that should be a good thing, Ruyan didn't feel relieved at all.

The Billiana Forest was like a sprawling sea of black against the backdrop of the village. Even from far, far away, it was easy to understand just how full of vigour it was. The vast sky and the vast sea of branches competed for space, and the leaves vied for whatever was left. It was a never-ending outburst of energy.

In contrast, Morea felt more like a village that huddled close to the ground. The homes were truly small. And as the sprawling forest behind it grew ever larger, spreading its wings to take on more land, it was as if the village of Morea was simply its next prey.

It was almost disgusting to see how the land around Morea became more and more fragile as it competed with the abundant forest.

And that was, really, the reason Morea and Solta had to fight.

Saris was curt, but it was the truth. And Ruyan knew it well. Even if it made so much sense that this useless conflict should have ended long ago with both villages finally starting to work together. But as long as Lestea's battalion refused to cast away their weapons, he and the others would simply have to respond in exactly the same way.

Staying true to themselves.

All the way to the bitter end.

They were fighting in order to destroy the forest. And Morea fought in order to protect it. So, as long as that forest stood, so would the army of Morea. Even if they were driven into a corner, they would not surrender.

They couldn't surrender.

Same goes for us, Ruyan thought. That even if he was the last one standing, he would surely never think of surrendering.

Every single human on this continent had their entire lives determined by the Billiana Forest. Going against this destiny, like a mercenary going wherever the winds took them, was simply an unthinkable way of life for anyone here.

Ruyan turned his eyes away from the forest. It filled him with such hate. The Billiana Forest didn't just eat away at the ground—but ceaselessly, deep inside his heart, too.

"Why can't Lestea's group just understand?"

The questions Ruyan had asked himself thousands of times already suddenly came spilling out.

"Why can't they understand how much misfortune that forest brings everyone? Don't they see how the forest is turning this whole entire world into a wasteland? Some as clever as Lestea should understand, so why doesn't she see what's really going on, and stop clinging

onto old traditions? If only they'd change their minds, then we'd finally be able to walk towards a..."

Ruyan held his tongue.

Ever so slightly, he turned his eyes in the direction of where Darius was. And at the moment his eyes met Darius's face, Ruyan finally felt the consequences of his impassioned spiel.

The look on Darius's face was grim. His reddish eyes were alight with fire, burning within his icy exterior, piercing through Ruyan with a furious glare.

Their eyes met. And Ruyan opened his mouth. But Darius was faster.

"Reconciliation? Never. Wake up."

The words, curt and pointed as they were, were like arrows one after the other.

"I will kill every last person from Morea. Even if they surrender, I won't."

Every word Darius uttered sliced through the air. And as soon as he had finished saying it, he let out one more angry exhale, and left.

Ruyan could only look down, head hung low as he bit his lips.

To get verbally reprimanded in front of everyone else, from Darius of all people. Words that nearly teetered on the edge of abuse. Ruyan felt a stinging pain in his heart.

All that remained was a pained, prolonged silence. Finally, Felk tried to clear the air, forcing out a few sounds of laughter. Putting on the most oblivious tone he could, he spoke up.

"Oy, what was all that, eh? What a show of bravery from someone always so quiet and moody. Lemme guess, those bees got him scrambling so bad the blood rushed to his head?"

But the crowd stayed silent as Felk's laughter dissipated into thin air. There was hesitation to poke light at how intense Darius's words were.

Ruyan's head was blank. He thought of catching up to Darius, but even if he did, he wouldn't even know the words to say to him.

They'd grown up raised as brothers, learning the art of swordplay together, but sometimes, it felt like Darius was so very far away from him.

It was as if he had built a fortress around his heart. A terribly strong fortress.

And once he closed his heart up, no one, not even Ruyan, could ever have any chance of getting through to him.

Once Lestea's group was eliminated—no, once the entirety of Morea was destroyed, would Darius finally be saved?

Would the shadows that clung to his heart finally clear away?

Ruyan simply didn't know.

Chapter 2

The fabric, becoming undone, flittered lightly in the wind.

Darius stopped in his tracks once he noticed. The bloodstained fabric wrapped around the back of his right hand was coming slack. He loosened it for a moment before habitually wrapping it up again.

The mark on the back of his hand had become more pronounced since the last time he'd checked it. Darius quietly laughed to himself. A laugh tinged with pity.

When he was a child—a time when he still knew nothing, a time when he was still innocent to the world, he recalled that the mark was also much more subtle in its appearance. The more people Darius killed, the more the vibrant the Crest became. As if it soaked up the blood flowing from them.

The cursed mark. There were those who called it that.

Why did the adults around him furrow their eyebrows as they laid eyes on that mark? Why did his mother look so sad as she gently stroked the back of his right hand? These were the kinds of questions the Darius of back then thought about.

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The oldest memory Darius could remember regarding the cursed mark was not that of his own.

Rather, it was that of the one on his father's back. *I must've been around 4 or 5 years old during that time*, Darius thought.

It was a humid day. But, suddenly, it started pouring a great deal of rain. Even though the entire morning was clear and bright, the weather abruptly changed by the time afternoon came. A torrential rain accompanied by thunder. By chance, his father had gone out for the day, but by the time he came back home, he was completely soaked.

Darius ran to get a cloth to help dry off his father. His father sat around the hearth of their home, clothes stripped off. *The rain got me*, he chuckled in defeat.

As Darius wiped off the rain from his father's back, his hands suddenly stopped. On his father's now-exposed back, was a vibrant pattern.

He stared deeply at it, as if in a daze. Darius's father craned his neck around, looking at his son.

"What's up? Your mother's getting me a change of clothes. Could you hurry and..."

As he spoke, he realised how intently his son was staring. Looking at a certain something, most likely. His father had a grim face as wry chuckles filled the air.

"Weird thing, isn't it?"

He reached his arm behind his back, thumping the mark comically.

It wasn't just a simple bruise or birthmark or anything like that, though. Like an eye, or a star, it was a very defined mark. It was almost as if his father's back was a fresh canvas, crayon drawings scrawled while he had it turned. *It was beautiful,* Darius thought back then.

"Dad, what is that?"

His father rubbed his hair as he answered.

"It's called the Crest."

"The Crest?"

Such a word had never reached his ears before. Darius repeated that short, small word to himself.

At that moment, his mother came in with a dry change of clothes.

Her husband quickly whispered something in her ear, something which Darius didn't understand very well. Looking back on it, it was most likely a warning of sorts, that the two shouldn't bring up the topic with him yet.

His father continued as he put on his clothes.

"I'll tell you more once you're a bit older. And that includes the mark on your hand, too."

Darius looked at the back of his right hand.

From the day he was born, there was a faint mark on the back of that hand. The colour was faint, its markings still hazy.

Compared to the pattern on his father's back, the one on his own hand was way more subdued, so much more unimpressive. Darius felt a tinge of disappointment.

"Dad, what is the Crest?"

Though Darius pressed him for more info, his father wouldn't answer any more of his questions. He tried to waggle his father's knee, to which his mother reprimanded him.

"Now, Darius, it's a complicated thing to talk about right now. When you're just a bit older, your father will tell you all about it."

Though Darius wanted to know more, seeing the somewhat sad expression on his mother's face gave him the sense that he shouldn't ask about it any further.

***

The village that Darius was born in was a place called Solta.

In those times, there were four villages on the continent of Edinbury. One of them was this village of Solta.

Life in that village was always on the brink. The infertile farmlands. The livestock that could never get enough feed. The changes in weather were abrupt and abnormal, for when torrential rains were predicted to fall, would instead come many months of drought. There were times that the livestock, taking so much effort to raise, would be completely wiped out in a thunderstorm of hail.

It was poverty such as this that often sowed the seeds of conflict. The four villages continually fought over land boundaries, water rights, with small conflicts happening with no end in sight. With just the tiniest disagreements over who owned what, the skirmishes eventually developed to the severity that blood was spilt with these battles. And these battles were only increasing in number. As people's paranoia and mistrust spread, so did their malicious words and slander.

The lands grew weaker with each battle, and in turn so did people's hearts grow rougher. It was a vicious cycle. At that time, Darius recalled that the village skies were always caked in an ash grey colour.

Darius's father was somewhat of a leader in the village, and with that status, they fared somewhat better. Oftentimes, Darius would go hand-in-hand with his mother around to much more impoverished households. They would go around the village, handing out food and medicine to the elderly, unable to get around due to their sickness and starvation.

To the young Darius, the elderly people who lived sprawled out in those dark, sparse houses looked like they were already dead, with their eerie, ghost-like appearances. Living in Solta was full of constant reminders of how they were living alongside death.

Darius's mother would treat the elderly as if her own parents, tending to them with loving care. As they grabbed the food with arms thin with malnutrition, interspersed between faint words of appreciation were other words as well.

—That forest is increasing with great speed, isn't it.

—The more and more we starve, the fuller and fuller those leaves flourish.

—It looks like it's increasing. It really looks like it's increasing.

His mother would gently soothe them down, bringing pieces of bread to their mouths.

One time, on their way home after listening to plenty of grievances from the elderly, Darius asked his mother a question.

"When all those grandpas talk about 'the Forest,' do they mean the Billiana Forest?"

As his mother held his hand, her footsteps matched in time to accommodate his short legs as they slowly walked home together, she responded.

“That’s right.”

“Why do all the grandpas hate the forest so much?”

“Hm, well...”

His mother looked to be having a hard time coming up with an answer.

The Billiana Forest was a forest that was very close to Solta, a dense and sprawling forest. A forest both sacred and both called a forest of magic, it was a place people deemed forbidden. Darius was no exception, having been taught never to go near the place.

“The Billiana Forest is a place where the trees are always lush and green, isn’t it? But if you look anywhere else, the land isn’t able to feed the animals properly at all.”

“Mhm.”

“We believe that people don’t have enough food to go around because the forest is stealing all the nutrients from all the soil. It makes everyone feel like they can’t do anything about it, no matter how hard they try.”

Darius understood his mother’s explanation very well. Compared to the wastelands that they lived among, the forest almost had an abnormal vitality to it. Rather than abundant and lush, the trees were an ominous sign. In Darius’s eyes, they were a horrible, dreadful thing.

“A long time ago, the Billiana Forest wasn’t as big as it is now.”

His mother had a faraway look in her eyes facing the Billiana Forest as she continued speaking.

“This is a story from perhaps a hundred or so years ago. At that time, where the forest was, there was a place by the name of the Rieubane Empire, and that land was their kingdom.”

“Rieubane?”

“Yes. It’s said that it was a prosperous, advancing kingdom. The Billiana Forest was still small back then. And within it was a small village by the name of Toledo, where the villagers used to protect the forest. The people of Toledo went their entire lives without talking or

making contact with other villages. It's said that their lives were solely dedicated to protecting the forest and all that entailed."

"Whoa..."

"For a long time, it was very peaceful in this empire. But then, at one point, the bad people in the Rieubane Empire figured out a terrible idea to solve their problems."

"What was it?"

"They wanted to use the power of the Billiana Forest for themselves. For that, they sent many soldiers to invade the village of Toledo. And in the process, they greatly hurt one of the priestesses[1] who protected the forest. The soldiers drew their weapons against the priestess's precious family."

"That's horrible..."

"Mm, it was horrible. At that moment, divine judgement struck down on them. Because of the priestess's powers, the Rieubane Empire disappeared entirely."

"Disappeared?"

[1]TL Note: Miko (巫女) is the word used here, but I'm sure this is 90% Sienna.

"That's what's been said of it. In only one night, that once-prospering empire was completely and entirely lost."

Darius swallowed his breath.

"It was all gone? Where... Where did it go?"

"No one knows. Even up until this day, it's still a mystery."

"But, there must've been lots and lots of families... Lots of homes... The people who lived here, did they all disappear, too?"

"Yes. They all but disappeared."

Darius tightly clung onto his mother's hand in fear.

In turn, Darius's mother pulled him into a reassuring hug.

"After the Rieubane Empire disappeared, the land that was once theirs became that of the Billiana Forest. Even now, there's not but a single trace of the empire's existence remaining."

"Did the forest... Did the forest swallow up all the people who lived in Rieubane?"

"Hmm.. That may be so, but we don't truly know."

Darius looked to the forest. Fear and anger welled up within him, and his look became that of a scowl.

Darius understood very clearly now why those elderly people looked at the Billiana Forest with furrowed eyebrows and hurled insults. The forest was a monster. A greedy, gluttonous monster. There was no doubt in Darius's head that one day, once more, just like how the Rieubane Empire was swallowed up, so too would the village of Solta and its inhabitants.

***

On occasion, a group of several men would gather in Darius's home. They would shut themselves in one of the rooms of the house, fiercely discussing for hours on end. And because this particular room was right beside Darius's bedroom, he could easily put his ear against the wall and listen to what his father and the men were talking about.

Of course, the flurry of dialogues was quite difficult for Darius, and he couldn't understand more than half of it.

But when the topic came to the questions around the Billiana Forest, it was that he could understand.

When it came to Darius's father, he became the centre of attention, with such impassioned speeches that even the most influential in Solta would listen to him.

"The Billiana Forest is vibrant and full of life to the extent that even the land below its roots is fertile and rich. We can't even start to compare the forest to its surrounding lands."

His father spoke with a power to his words. Approving voices came from the crowd.

"By clearing the forest, and creating more farmland, we should expect far more abundance in our crop harvests. And it wouldn't just be Solta, but our neighbouring villages, all of our current worries about poverty and famine would disappear. And with our shortages gone, we would have no reason to fight, and our four villages would be able to walk hand in hand towards a prosperous future."

"But..."

Opposing voices would come from the crowd, too.

"The Billiana Forest is said to have the power to purify the world. If we were to clear cut it, do you think the forest would take mercy on us? Once we fell the trees, we can never undo our actions. Think about what they say about the Rieubane Empire. What was their reward for intruding on the Billiana Forest, but complete destruction...?"

In that moment, both voices of criticism and approval welled up into disorder within the small room. The one who quieted them all down was none other than Darius's father.

"The saying that the empire disappeared in but a single night is just a superstition to the very end. That the empire fell into ruin from incurring the anger of the forest is something I have no basis in believing in."

"But, if we were to refer to the literature we have on hand..."

"I don't believe in legends such as those. The downfall of the Rieubane Empire has nothing to do with that forest. I believe the truth to be none other than a natural disaster—to be entrapped by silly superstitions like that will distract you from the real issues at hand. What really matters is breaking out of this cycle of poverty, and if you'd rather look at stories and neglect our reality, then that is the height of foolishness."

His father's speech made many allies on his side. The opposing faction had no more words left to say on the matter.

As Darius listened in from his side of the bedroom, he nearly started applauding out of instinct himself.

If only the people truly took action on his father's words and clear cut the forest. If only that infuriating band of monstrous trees would fall once and for all, they could have prosperous fields of farmland right then and there.

No more having to see the visages of the elderly, so pained in their lack of food. No more having to hear the grieving voices of the villagers. The sky above the village no longer a gloomy ash grey, but rather clear and bright. Everyone would be happy. Even just thinking about it made Darius's arms restless.

These meetings would often go late into the night with heated discussion to match. The longer they went on, the less opposition it met, and the more the people took notice of Darius's father's views.

Within these talks, the word "Morea" was often thrown around. That was the name of the village right beside Solta.

Apparently, the villagers of Morea had views that were directly opposed to Solta's. The entire village viewed the Billiana Forest as sacred ground. To imagine that someone would even think about doing something as unspeakable as clear cutting the forest, they kept their eyes on a particular person within Solta. In their eyes, Darius's father was that of an enemy.

***

On one day, one night in particular, a girl who lived in the neighbourhood came by for a visit along with her father. She was a girl by the name of Sharline.

Sharline was quite a few years older than Darius and often looked after him, similar to that of an older sister. Her father, just like Darius's father, was concerned about the future of Solta, and often participated in the meetings.

Sharline retreated into Darius's room, having said that she came over to play with him. That much was true—but there was a much more important matter that came before playtime. The two stood side-by-side against the door, ears pressed as they listened to their fathers' discussion going on beyond the walls.

hello there!
here to play with darius?
oh yes! that's what I wanted to do!
actually eavesdrops on political debates LIKE A BOSS

"Sounds pretty complicated in there. Do you get it, Darius?"

Sharline had one eye narrowed as she asked in a quiet voice. Darius puffed out his chest with a triumphant "of course I get it."

"Woow, how smart you are. Well then, what's your opinion on what our fathers are talking about?"

"That they're entirely right, of course."

Darius would time and time again try to copy what he recalled his father saying, repeating back the opinions of his father and his group.

"It's 'cause, because of the Billiana Forest, our village is suffering from po... pob... pobber..."

"Poverty."

"Suffering from poverty and all. So if we cut down that forest, we'll definitely be able to make some good farmland for everyone."

"And the people of Morea are against this proposal, aren't they?"

"'Cuz they're all stupid."

Sharline scolded him. "Darius, those are bad words and you shouldn't be using them," she spoke sternly.

"But, but, don't you feel the same way, Sharline? That what our dads are talking about is the correct opinion to have..."

"Well, yes. Of course, I agree with what our fathers are saying... But, I kinda get the way that the Moreans feel."

Sharline had a look of deep thought on her face as she spoke.

Darius wasn't very satisfied, however.

"But, why?! 'Cuz, because of that forest our village is suffering from po... pob... pobber..."

"Poverty. Yes, I know that well, but, still, they say the forest's got a mysterious power to it, don't they? Darius, have you heard about the Lost Empire of Rieubane?"

"I do, my mom told me all about it. But, still, it's still a made up fairy tale. It's not a real thing."

"Maybe so. But, y'know, to me, I really think there's a huge secret about the Billiana trees that we don't know yet. If we cut those trees down, something terrible just might happen..."

"So then, Sharline, are you saying that you're against what our dads are saying?"

"No... I'm not."

Sharline had a gentle expression as she shook her head.

"Both your father and mine are amazing people. Almost every night, they're here discussing what they want for the village's future. They're thinking so earnestly about this village. Whatever they decide, I don't believe they can go wrong. But, it's just... I'm a little worried, I guess."

"Don't be such a scaredy-cat, Sharline. There's nothing to worry about!"

Sharline was so taken aback at Darius's cheeky remark that she had to laugh a bit.

Soon, the meeting came to a close. Sharline's father called for his daughter to "get going home."

At that, Darius waved his hand with a "see you later" to her.

Sharline waved back at him as well.

At the doorway, Sharline's father looked nervous as he spoke with Darius's father.

"You ought to keep an eye on those Moreans. There's been word of a more radical group forming within them."

"Radical?"

"Yeah. They may be protectors of the Billiana Forest, but they're an armed force, too. You'd be their number one enemy right now."

"Ooh, is that so, eh?"

Darius's father exclaimed, an exaggerated tone in his voice.

"I guess to them in the end, we're just the baddies who wanna tear down their sacred forest."

"This is serious. Please, you really need to keep watch around you."

"I gotcha, I gotcha!"

Darius's father spoke, with a smile on his face. He didn't look to be taking the advice to heart.

Sharline was listening to the two men's discussion with a worried look on her face. She turned her attention their way, about to speak. Darius's father simply nodded slightly as he continued on.

"There's nothing to worry about, Sharline. Your father here's just a worrywart, that's all."

"That so, huh..."

Sharline's father could only put on an awkward smile. Darius's father laughed.

"The Moreans can't be that foolish. Speaking frankly, the closest villages to the Billiana Forest are our Solta and their Morea. And the villages who've suffered the most poverty? Again, it's Solta and Morea. So, shouldn't the two villages most affected by the forest ought to work together? And yet, we don't."

"Well..."

"I believe I have what it takes to convince them of my ideas—for in the end, the pen is mightier than the sword. That being said, I'm grateful for your words of caution. I'll be careful, so do rest assured."

With that, Sharline and her father went back home.

Darius's mother stood close to her husband, with a worried look on her face.

He simply uttered a particularly cheerful "not to worry" to her, laughter in his tone.

***

Darius's mark wasn't getting any deeper in colour like that of his father's. Rather, on the other hand, it looked like it could fade away at any moment. Trying to see if he could make it stand out more, Darius tried scrubbing his hand and soaking it in hot water.

When his mother took notice of how focused Darius was on his mark, she held his small hand in hers, gently caressing it.

"Darius, it's best that you shouldn't mention that mark of yours to other people."

"Why?"

His mother was at a loss on how to answer that one question of his.

"Hmm, well... Within our village, there are people who don't like that mark."

"Why?"

"Unfortunately, they're people who still believe in old superstitions. It's something called hard-headed."

Darius could hardly grasp his mother's explanation. Why would anyone hate such a pretty mark?

"Dad has one too. On his back."

As Darius spoke, his mother's face suddenly stiffened up.

"You must never say anything about that to other people."

"Is it a secret?"

"Yes. A secret."

His mother's face was grim as she spoke. Darius had no choice but to nod.

***

Still, in the end, the young Darius could not understand why his mother said the things she did. What made the mark so taboo to speak of? What was his mother afraid of? He didn't know.

One day, Darius was tasked to deliver food to an elderly woman, living nearby by herself. Though he usually went alongside his mother, for that particular day, some urgent business had popped up, rendering his mother unable to go.

Though his mother looked worried, Darius put on his best impression of his father with a "not to worry" as he went out. After so many visits, he could easily recall the path to the old woman's house as well as her appearance. Carrying a large basket filled with food, he made his entrance.

The old woman sat up in her bed, welcoming Darius.

"You came all the way out here all by yourself? What a big boy you are now. Thank you."

The old woman's eyes narrowed in happiness as he brought over bread and vegetables.

When the time came to leave, the old woman hesitatingly opened her mouth to speak.

"My boy."

"Wha?"

"Would you let me see your hand for just a moment?"

"Huh?"

Darius was so puzzled that he brought his hand out without a single thought. The elderly woman took hold of his right hand, and brought it closer to her face for a better look on the back of it. The woman's wizened face suddenly turned stiff.

"You've got a mark there, don't you?"

"...Yeah..."

"I must've not noticed it before. If I'm not mistaken... That's the Crest you have on your hand, there."

The Crest. His father had called it that once, didn't he?

"Grandma, do you know what the Crest is?"

"...Yes."

The old woman let go of Darius's hand. Her face contorted into that of fear, which the young Darius just couldn't understand.

"I just wanna know... What's the Crest? When I ask my mom and dad, they just won't tell me either."

"My dear. I'm so sorry for you."

"Eh?"

"The Crest, as they say, is the brand of someone cursed."

The old woman hugged her shawl closer as if there was a chill in the air.

Darius was speechless.

"Someone cursed? You mean, it's a bad thing?"

"That's right. Those who are branded by that mark will bring about calamity. A long time ago, it was said that only terrible things revolved around those with the mark. Not only that, but there were many times in which the person themselves would be led to an early death. They would be embroiled in incidents and grave illness alike."

Darius stood there, mouth agape. He would've never thought that explanation would come from that old woman, not once in a thousand years. More than pain, more than sadness, he simply just could not comprehend it.

The old woman looked at Darius with an uneasy look.

"My dear, I think you ought to get home now."

".....Huh?"

"I'm sorry for speaking about that. Forgive me. I know very well that you're a good child. You're always delivering food to bring to me, and I am truly grateful for it. But it's just that... I'm afraid. I'm just afraid of that thing on your hand."

"..."

"You should get going, my dear. Please go home."

The elderly woman sunk back into her bed, turning her eyes away from Darius.

Darius took the basket, now empty, and slowly made his leave. The words the old woman had said to him were finally starting to sink in, like a stinging pain in his chest.

Darius looked at the back of his right hand. The mark had become just a bit deeper than he'd ever seen it before.

The Crest. That which marks a person cursed.

Terrible things would occur one after the other surrounding those with the mark.

"No..."

He whispered, mind still in a daze.

He never had even a shred of suspicion. Neither his father nor his mother would tell him anything. He just thought that mark of his was a pretty looking thing. That was all.

Darius recalled the words his mother told him with that grim look on her face.

How in their village, there were people who didn't like that mark. Those stubborn, hard-headed people who still believe in old superstitions... Now, he finally understood what she was trying to say to him.

"No... No way..."

He dropped the basket he held in his left hand, falling to the floor. Darius looked at his right hand, tears welling in his eyes.

He hung his head low to the ground, his sobs only becoming louder and louder.

At that moment, a voice called out.

"Darius? What's wrong?"

Flustered, Darius wiped his eyes and raised his head up. Sharline was standing there with a surprised look on her face.

"Were you just crying there? Oh, geez... Was somebody bullying you?

Sharline kneeled down, using the sleeve of her shirt to wipe the tears off of Darius's face.

"Here, dry your tears. Boys don't cry, right?"

".....Yea."

"So, what happened? Did you get in a fight?"

"....No..."

Darius bit his lips. His eyes were starting to blur with tears once more.

If it was anybody else, he wouldn't be telling them a single thing. He'd throw out a hollow "nothing happened" and run straight back home.

But, Sharline was like a sister to him. She'd always treated Darius with such kindness, surely she could be someone he could tell it to.

Darius's voice quivered as he spoke.

"Um... Sharline..."

"Yeah?"

"It's... This thing."

Darius raised his hand up for her to see.

All at once, a wave of nervousness washed over Sharline's face.

It startled Darius.

So Sharline also knew what the Crest was after all? Was she just putting on a front and pretending not to see it the whole time?

"What is it, Darius? What's up with your hand?"

"....It's... This mark..."

Darius was on the verge of tears as he continued to speak.

"It's called the Crest or something... And if you have it, it means you're cursed... It's like the mark makes lots of bad things happen to you... So maybe bad things are happening now because I have it... Maybe, I'm the reason all the villagers are in so much pain..."

"Darius."

Sharline took hold of his right hand, squeezing it. It was rare for her voice to be so strict. It was rare at all for her bright, always-smiling face to be anything otherwise, but her face was serious. She looked so mature, as if she grew up all at once.

"Who. Who said that to you?"

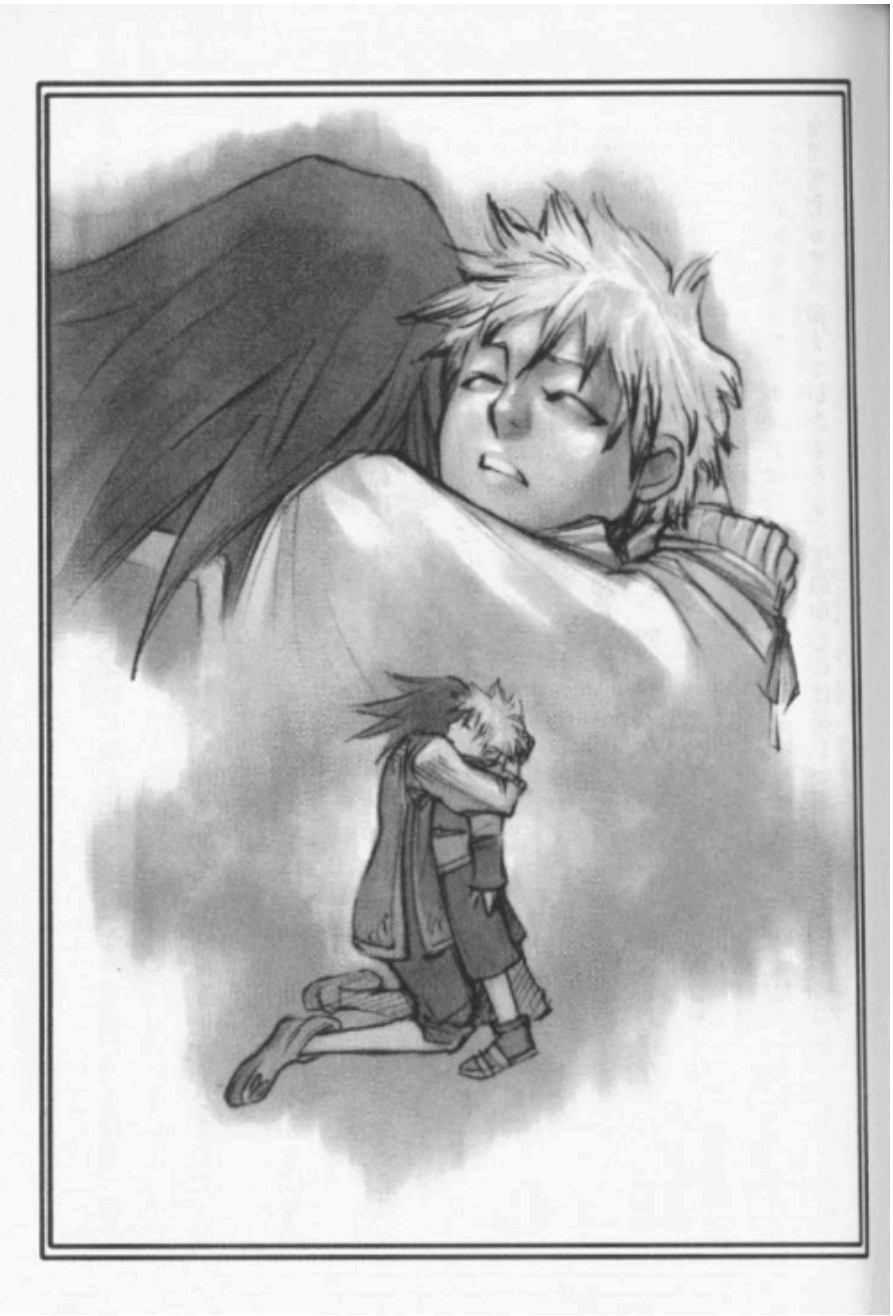
"..."

"That's just a superstition. It's not true at all."

"Sharline..."

"Don't you ever believe in that. There's nothing about that mark that's cursed. Darius, there's nothing about you that's cursed."

In that moment, Sharline took that teary face in front of her, the one of Darius's, and hugged him tightly.



Sharline's hair brushed against Darius's nose. Though her hair was a bit ticklish.

A gentle scent drifted up. And all at once, the pain in Darius's heart drifted away as well.

***

When Darius looked back at his childhood, life in the village wasn't easy, but he could still recall those faint memories, surrounded in light.

The ongoings of the villagers were trifling to him. Though there were indeed people like the old woman, who looked down upon the mark on Darius's hand with eyes of scorn.

Still, Darius's parents would step in to protect him. They gave him plenty of love, so as not to grow bitter or afraid of the world.

And then there was Sharline. She had become much more of a presence in Darius's life. She was truly just like an older sister to Darius, caring for him with great affection. At times, when the nearby children would tease and bully Darius, she would scold them with a furious rage.

Being wrapped in so much affection, Darius would undoubtedly grow up as happily as anyone else would be.

It should've been that way. But the time was quickly approaching. The fateful night where everything changed.

The night where misfortune would befall those men from Morea. And the night where great misfortune would befall Darius himself.

***

That night, Sharline came over to Darius's house to play.

Although it wasn't anything out of the ordinary for Sharline to drop by his house as she often did. Ever since the day when Darius learned of the Crest's true meaning, she began visiting even more frequently than before. She must've been worried about Darius's feelings and the pain that mark brought.

After enjoying a dinner prepared by Darius's mother, the two settled down into the living room as always. As his father sat on the couch reading a book, Darius was chatting with Sharline.

The sound of water could be heard from the kitchen, no doubt coming from his mother as she washed the dishes. This was an everyday occurrence, a peaceful harmony.

"It was said that within the Lost Empire of Rieubane was a special kind of weapon. They were called something like Palmira Armaments."

Sharline spoke, telling a story she must've heard from someone, somewhere.

"Palmira? What kinda stuff is that?"

"Erm... I can't really say for sure. Just that, like, these weapons had a special power in them."

"Huh. Sharline, are you really sure you know what you're talking about?"

"It's hard to explain! And it's a story from long ago. We can just stop here if you don't wanna listen, you know."

Sharline pouted a little bit, but she continued to tell her story—after Darius apologised to her.

"With these weapons in hand, Rieubane was able to conquer its neighbouring kingdoms. It was said that Rieubane became very, very prosperous. In the centre of this empire was a beautiful palace where its almighty king reigned over his people. And I'm sure there was beautiful princesses and handsome princes, too."

"Okay, whatever about the princess and all that. I wanna hear more 'bout the Palmira Armaments."

"Someone's picky. Well... About that, I believe these Palmira Armaments and the Billiana Forest are connected in some way."

"The forest?"

"Mhm. It's said they used the Billiana fruit to create those weapons. Those Palmira Armaments could bring out every ounce of a single person's strength. So in that way, the people who wielded those weapons could do amazing things. They could run much faster for as long as they wanted, jump even higher, and swing a sword with much more strength than we can even imagine."

"That's so cooool..."

"Of course, I dunno how much of this is true. Anyways, after realising how much potential the Billiana fruit held, I believe the Rieubane Empire wanted to obtain more and more of this power. With that, they decided to invade the village of Toledo, a village dedicated to protecting the Billiana Forest."

"I know that story. My mother told it to me before. In one night, Rieubane disappeared entirely, right?"

"That's the one. It's a real mystery, huh? How's it possible that the empire's palace, its roads, and its homes all disappeared just like that, I wonder? All those people, I just have to wonder where they all could've gone..."

"It's all made up, Sharline."

Darius's father piped in, raising his head from the book they had assumed he was just completely engrossed in.

"Legends like that can tell one small part of history, yet at the same time, it can very well distort the truth of what really happened. Sure, I can believe that this country of Rieubane existed for a short time here on Edinbury, and that it collapsed in a very short span of time. But all those stories about Palmira Armaments and the wrath of the Billiana Forest, completely fabricated."

"...That so, huh..."

Sharline nodded.

Darius, on the other hand, had been completely captivated by the story of Palmira Armaments, and felt just a bit dejected hearing that.

"Huh, so it's... Not real?"

"Well, Darius, you believe in dreams, right? Legends are pretty similar in that way. Not any old story can be called a legend, after all!"

"Which, in the end, is still not real."

"I... Well..."

Sharline awkwardly grinned.

It was time. There was a knock at the front door. A voice came from the kitchen, that of Darius's mother saying "just a minute," to which Darius got up, too.

Sharline spoke.

"A visitor, at this time? That sure is rare."

"Yeah. I'll go see who."

As Darius reached the front entrance, he stood near the door, still closed just to be safe.

"May I ask who it is?" He inquired.

An easygoing tone of what sounded to be a man answered him.

"Sorry to bother you so late in the day. I'm here to return some things. Would you open the door?"

Darius didn't have even a shred of suspicion to think what things the man was returning.

The man's voice was gentle, in the tone like one of their neighbours, someone who was just going to drop in for a short visit.

Darius opened the door.

All at once, a strong arm reached out and grabbed Darius, restraining him. Before he could even scream out, a hand muffled his mouth.

It wasn't just one person behind the door. It was five men, clothed in black, spilling into their house as if a murky crowd.

With Darius captured and taken care of, they rushed further into the house.

The moment they reached the living room, Darius's father jumped up from his couch. Sharline let out a brief scream.

Darius's father, very quickly, could grasp who the men were and why they were here. He watched the intruding men closely with a dreadful look in his eyes.

"...You're all from Morea?"

"That's correct."

The man who answered that had to be in his forties, and was also the man restraining Darius.

The other men of the group had weapons ready in hand. A sharp blade was pointed squarely at Darius's neck.

"D-Darius..."

Sharline's voice trembled as she called to him. And when his mother came out from the kitchen, she too, screamed paralysed in horror. The plate she had been holding onto shattered on the floor.

Darius's father moved not even one step from his spot. There was a sword pointed against his son's life—one wrong step would seal his fate. He spoke, trying to smother any hint of emotion underneath.

"Is this about the Billiana Forest?"

"Indeed it is. You ignored our warnings. We will not allow our forest to be cut down by the likes of you."

"You and your ways are truly a danger to us all."

Another man spoke up, hate dripping from his words.

"We cannot allow for you to continue any further. To us, protecting this forest is our mission."

"Please, wait."

Darius's father nearly took a step forward, but stopped himself from doing anything rash.

"Let's talk about this. I'll listen to what your group has to say. But I ask that you let go of my son before anything else."

The men exchanged looks at each other, but the restrains on Darius were not loosened.

"The time for discussion has long gone."

The voice came from the man who captured Darius—he seemed to be the leader.

Darius's father shook his head.

"Why did it come to this? You won't solve anything like this. Not with violence..."

"Enough from you!"

The man spoke with growing irritation.

"People like you cannot be left alive any longer. In order to protect the Billiana Forest, there is no other way than for you to die."

Darius could see his father tremble, just for a moment.

But he wasn't trembling from fear. Forgoing words, choosing violence, and a certain kind of one-sided violence where his own son was being used as a shield against him, he was shaking with rage.

"Step out. With your hands up."

The Morea leader ordered.

There was no way out. Darius's father did as the man commanded.

A young man stepped forward, spear in hand. Darius cried out for his father in delirium.

A short, militaristic, shout could be heard.

And at the same time, the young man pierced his spear into his father's body.

Another shriek could be heard. This time, it came from Sharline.

Darius's father stumbled as fresh blood seeped out from his torso. His lips seemed to be saying something, perhaps wanting to say "release my son," but once more, the spear pierced through his body a second time. His father's towering body fell to the floor.

Another person stepped up. He had a sword in hand. And with it, he slashed into his father's body.

It was a slaughter. A completely one sided slaughter. The man who could do nothing, for his son was held hostage, brutalised as if a plaything to them.

He was slashed, kicked at, and stabbed, until finally he could move no longer. Though they realised that his body had already been extinguished of life, it only gave the men from

Morea renewed ferocity. They were drunk on blood, their hands clutching weapons that of assassins, waving them madly.

Darius's eyes were opened wide. When he saw the spear go through his father's body, something stabbed deep within himself, too.

The sight unravelling before his eyes was nothing more than a scene from a horrifying story.

This wasn't real. This was just make-believe. There was nothing else he could think of.

His mother fell to the floor. She was unconscious.

The men in black took notice. She, too, was stabbed with a spear.

"Mom!"

Darius cried out.

This was reality. This wasn't a fairy tale. This wasn't a dream. His father was killed, and now in the same way, soon would his mother.

Darius struggled with all of his strength. He bit as hard he could into the arm that was restraining him. The man cried out, and in the panic, Darius made a run for it.

"Mom!"

Darius tried to run to his mother's side, but no sooner did the man catch him by the neck.

"You little...!"

The man struck Darius in fury. It was a blow hard enough to send Darius's small body against the wall, crumpling to the ground.

Sharline was cowering in a corner of the room. Her eyes were wide open as she watched Darius with horror.

The intentions of the Morea assassins were clear as day now. They hadn't come here just to kill Darius's father. Even unrelated parties to this conflict, women and children alike, all were to be slaughtered without a hint of mercy. They must've wanted to make an example. An example to those who still wanted to continue forward with the logging of the Billiana Forest.

"Finish it."

On the leader's command, a sword-wielding man stepped up, walking closer and closer to Darius.

Darius, still in a daze from the impact on his head, looked upon the blade coming his way. It was a blade, still drenched in the blood of his father and mother.

He was going to be killed.

Just like his parents. That blade would slice through him.

That was the only thought going through his mind.

Sharline screamed.

"Darius!"

Getting up from her spot, Sharline lunged forward and grabbed at the man from behind.

The man's sense of balance was thrown off. Sharline's face was dishevelled, trying to shout as loud as she could.

"Run away, Darius!"

"This damn..."

The man's face contorted in anger, readjusting his target to the girl who had lunged at him.

A sword was unsheathed in hand.

Darius, still weakly leaning against the wall, saw a vision before his eyes.

He could feel it. That the flow of time had, strangely, suddenly, slowed to a near standstill.

He could see it. The people, the things, everything before his eyes slowly drained of colour.

The only thing that wasn't lifeless was her. Amidst it all, only she remained dazzling.

—Sharline.

When Darius was in pain, when he was miserable, when he was thrown into despair, she would always wrap him up in a hug. How gentle Sharline was.

And when that blade inched closer and closer to Darius, she leapt out without so much of an afterthought for her own safety—just how much bravery could such a gentle frame hold?

How strong Sharline was.

Darius's right hand became hot.

A heat as if flames burst forth from him.

Darius raised his hand up. Like something else had taken the form of his hand entirely.

The mark on the back of his hand glowed furiously like never before.

In his hazy memories, it looked like the mark on his father's back—or no, it was much stronger, draped in a menacing glow.

Darius raised his hand aloft, above his head.

Much, much more than before, the Crest seemed to glow with a glare, looking back at all the hate in the world cast upon its way, taking control of Darius's body.

As if in sync with his heartbeat, the Crest radiated a glow from within his veins. Like a single strike of thunder, he could feel his entire body suddenly warming up, all the strength building deep within his body.

Darius grit his teeth. For if he didn't endure it with all his strength, then the strength within his body would surely overpower him and tear his own body to shreds.

The man raised his sword.

Sharline was still knelt down. The sword aloft her head.

With one swing downwards, Sharline would be gone. But the girl's head was raised up, her resolve steeled, facing the destiny coming towards her.

—Sharline.

The Sharline he loved.

Darius opened his mouth. He wanted to shout it out. The most important name in the world. But no words came out.

Only a burst of dazzling, white light flashed before his eyes.

Darius shut his eyes tightly. That light, he knew, had to have come from the back of his right hand.

Such a thing had been sleeping within him this whole time. A frightful beast, awoken in frenzy.

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When he came to, the sight before him was completely different.

The men were splayed on the ground. Their weapons were still in hand.

Their bodies were hardly recognizable, ripped apart with the force of a million cuts. Among their bodies were limbs and necks, cut so savagely that they were nearly hanging on by a thread.

The smell of blood permeated throughout the room. Darius could only blink.

Was it just a dream? The men who had barged in on his home? The murder of his parents? Was it all just nothing but a simple nightmare?

No. Of course it wasn't. The bodies of his father and mother were still there, on the floor, lifeless.

Just... Just what had happened?

"Sharline?"

Darius got up, calling for her in a small voice.

Sharline was there in the middle of the room, her eyes closed. Darius made his way over to her, half crawling, half stumbling.

"Sharline... Sharline!"

He called, trying to shake her awake.

Very slightly, Sharline opened her eyes.

Darius almost burst out in tears from the relief.

"Thank goodness, Sharline... It's safe now... All the bad guys are gone. They're all dead now, Sharline..."

Darius clung to Sharline tightly, his face in her chest. Just like always, just like any other time, he could smell that sweet scent from her once more.

"Darius..."

Sharline smiled, her hand raised, fingers just lightly grazing Darius's cheek. Darius took her hand and grabbed it as tightly as he could.

"I... I'm..."

He couldn't quite hear what she said. The words were hoarse, difficult to make out.

Sharline smiled, a smile more beautiful than any he'd seen before. And with that, her eyes closed.

Darius could only look at her, his eyes vacant.

She had to be sleeping. She must've been so tired that she passed out. Otherwise—

"Sharline?"

Darius called, jostling her body. But there was no longer any response.

No way.

There was no way that Sharline was dead. It wasn't true. It shouldn't be true.

Her face looked so peaceful, as if she was just sleeping. At that moment, Darius could feel something change within him once more. He swallowed his breath, eyes fixated on his right hand.

The Crest began to glow once more. Just like before—no, brighter than before, hotter than before.

Darius understood now. How that mark of his, it had been responding to his emotions all this time. In his violent rage, or perhaps trapped in overwhelming despair, when it became too much to bear, that's when that frightening power would burst out.

Darius raised his hand up once more, as if trying to grab onto something, and closed his eyes. There was nothing else to think about anymore. Only for his body to move on its own, guided once more by that power.

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That was where Darius's memories ended. What happened afterwards was shrouded in haze, only vague and distant now. From what he had heard, they had found him sitting with a glazed stare in that living room, strewn with lifeless bodies. Though he was rescued from there, the events of the few days afterwards were all a blank from the shock.

When he had finally recovered, he was able to speak to the adults about what had happened, but still, he couldn't say all of it with certainty.

The assassins from Morea had come to kill Darius's father, who was leading the logging of the forest, and had invaded his home. That much was for sure. But, how all those men were brutally slaughtered, that much he didn't know. Logically, how could a child like Darius murder every last one of those men, trained in their strength to fight and kill?

—Well, haven't you seen the mark on the boy's right hand?

—My, you're right. It's the Crest. No doubt about it.

—If that's the case, then his father must've had the cursed mark as well...

Those voices swirled above Darius's head. But for him, it was the least of his thoughts.

His father was dead. So was his mother. And even Sharline.

Had it been just an illusion? How the heat rose from his right hand, as if it had burst into flames? How the white light burst from the Crest, how that must've been, surely...

Darius dared not to speak of anything, not to anyone.

While he struggled to grasp with those mysteries, the events of his family's murder were quickly covered up. In the end, Darius left Solta, to go to the faraway village of Seclue, moving in with a friend of his father.

The man was a kind person, and warmly took in the orphaned Darius into his own family.

And, the man had one child. A boy by the name of Ruyan. With soft, blond hair, and long eyelashes that framed his blue eyes, he looked to be a rather sweet boy. He was just one year younger than Darius was.

"It's nice to meet you, Darius!"

With a greeting at their first meeting, Ruyan jovially extended a hand out.

Darius stuck out his right hand, but upon noticing his own mark, scrambled to bring it back.

Though Darius had rejected the handshake, Ruyan had nary a displeased look on his face. With a bright, picturesque smile without a shred of a shadow, it was easy to tell he was a good-natured person.

Just a little. Just a little bit, did he resemble Sharline.

Darius gripped the mark on his right hand.

Of course, Ruyan was a boy. And Sharline was much older than them both. Nothing about his physical appearance was similar, but in his kind expressions, and gentle demeanour, somehow, there was a feeling common in them both.

But Darius could not open his heart up to Ruyan in any way. If his mind were to wander to how similar Ruyan was to Sharline, then so would those memories of Sharline's dying smile come to mind, sending his words into a scramble.

Ruyan was patient. He never tried to pry about what had happened to Darius, and though Darius was unable to open up to Ruyan, he never once let irritation or annoyance show on his face.

He was truly a thoughtful person. Bright, polite, and full of life. In time, even the stubborn Darius found himself drawn to Ruyan before he knew it.

Soon came the time that the two began to train in swordplay together.

At first, it was Ruyan's desire to learn. It wasn't just for show, but there wasn't anything deep to it, either—like swordplay was just another thing to check off his list.

But, to Darius, who was just brought along, wielding that sword alone seemed to possess him. His improvement was fast, and soon enough even their master was astounded.

Though Ruyan lagged behind at first, watching Darius's progress was enough to light a fire under himself as well. With bout after bout of intense training, he caught up to Darius before long.

Ruyan's sword was bright. Darius's was dark. Their master had said something like that once.

Though Ruyan didn't seem to understand, Darius understood those words perfectly.

After training had ended on that day, Darius and Ruyan sat at the terrace drinking tea.

“I do wonder what he meant by those words he spoke...?”

Ruyan questioned.

Darius answered him.

“I get what he means. To me, when I swing my sword, it’s out of hate. But you’re different. To you, I’m sure you fight to protect the things that are important to you.”

Ruyan was a little taken aback. *I see*, he answered, a little too innocently. Darius held back a laugh.

Ruyan tilted his head, peering into Darius’s face.

“Now that I think of it, this is the first time we’ve really spoken about swordplay together. Darius, why did you decide to take up swordsmanship? To hate your enemy... What do you mean by that?”

“I...”

Darius raised the cup to his mouth, answering the question.

He used his left hand to raise the cup. His right hand, he never used much in his daily life. The only time he truly worked his right hand was when he wielded his sword. Wrapped under several layers of fabric was that Crest hidden.

“I want to get stronger.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t want to let anyone else die anymore. That’s how strong I need to be.”

“Darius...”

Ruyan swallowed his breath.

Darius continued, his tone detached.

“Both my father and mother were killed in front of my eyes. There was nothing I could do to stop it. I could only watch as they were torn to shreds and stabbed to death.”

“Darius, that’s...”

“And then there was Sharline. She was just a girl who lived nearby. She was like a sister to me. And she died trying to protect me. Because I was completely powerless. Because I couldn’t do anything. I could only watch the life extinguish from her eyes.”

“But, none of that was your faul—“

“It doesn’t matter whose fault it was. I just can’t let anyone else important to me die anymore. I have to get stronger. Strong enough that nobody will ever be able to stop me.”

Ruyan became quiet for a moment, struck by the intensity of his declarations.

After a sip of tea to moisten his throat, he spoke again.

“Darius. It’s just as you said, isn’t it? Yes, you swing your sword with hate towards your enemy. But, if what you say is true, aren’t our desires ultimately one and the same? As for me, I fight so that I can protect my family and friends. Your goal is the same as mine, isn’t i—”

“We’re not the same.”

Darius laughed.

"You and I are different, Ruyan. You're straightforward. There's not a single blemish on you. To put it as simply as possible, you fight in the name of salvation. For the sake of what you love."

"..."

"What pushes me forward is hate. More than anything, first and foremost, I want to strike down my enemies. The Moreans that murdered my parents and Sharline. I fight so that I can kill them all."

"But, Darius. The assassins that targeted your family, didn't they..."

"They all died. Every last one of them."

Darius spoke, cutting off Ruyan's words.

"But it's not enough. I will never forgive Morea. It's not just the assassins, I will never forgive every single last one those Moreans. I'll fight until the day that village is gone. And when they're gone, then next will be that damned Billiana Forest they worship so much. I can't stop, not until the day my father's dreams of turning that forest into vast land becomes reality."

"...Darius..."

"Ruyan. Look here."

Darius began to slowly unwrap the cloth around his right hand.

The amount of times Darius showed the Crest to anyone since coming to Seclue could be counted on one hand.

To Ruyan, who spent countless days sleeping and playing with Darius like a pair of brothers, he'd caught a glimpse of it at least once or twice. Even so, Ruyan had never truly asked about the origin of it. It was the first time that Darius unravelled that cloth, showing the mark to him as clear as day.

Ruyan looked upon Darius's hand with a faintly sad expression.

It was there, on the back of his right hand. Red, exposed bare from the cloth that used to hide it. What was once a faint mark in his childhood was far deeper now.

The Crest. The cursed mark.

"I'm sure you've heard. How the assassins that attacked my family were all slaughtered by what seemed to be the cut of a thousand swords. Killed before they even realised what was happening to them. The only person who survived that room, that little kid who sat there with nothing on his face, that little kid who was me."

"Darius..."

"My memories from that time are blurry now. But, I still remember one thing. The moment I thought Sharline was going to be killed, I remember the strange heat I felt from my right hand. That mark, it was remarkably vivid, it was so clear, how it glowed from deep within. Then, a white light, an explosion that was so bright I could hardly open my eyes, and when I came to, they were all dead. Every last one of those men. I have no doubt in my mind, Ruyan. I was the one who did that. The Crest went wild with power and killed them all."

"....."

"And it wasn't only those bastards who died because of this Crest of mine. Sharline got caught in it. That's right, it wasn't those assassins who killed Sharline. It was never them. It was me. That's right. I, to her, I..."

His words kept spilling out with such force. Ruyan, flustered, set his cup down on the plate and watched over Darius with concern.

Darius carefully rewrapped the cloth around his right hand, taking steady breaths.

"So... Now, you get why. I don't want this thing to take control of me ever again. I believe it can sense what I'm feeling. And it reacts accordingly. When I take their lives, I want it to be with my sword, not the Crest. And that is why I keep training."

"If so, then I'll fight at your backside so that I can protect you."

Darius could feel something suddenly tighten up within him hearing Ruyan's words.

Only Ruyan could utter something so innocently, as if it was second nature to him, words so deadly serious that anyone else would've just laughed off. His words were as straightforward as the way he looked straight at Darius with beautiful golden eyes.

"You can fight without worry. In the same way you swing your sword to your heart's content, I will become your shield."

Darius flinched, and turned his gaze away.

Ruyan's words were plenty unlike a shield right now—how straightforward and pointed they were, to the point where it was embarrassingly awkward for him.

"You really don't have to be with me. What I want to do has nothing to do with you. You still have your family. You're all alive and well. You're happy. You shouldn't throw that all away just to follow me, to be dragged down..."

"Darius, I respect your father deeply. Although I never got the chance to meet him, my own father has always said that he was an amazing person. The way he fought so deeply for Solta's sake, you may as well say the axe he wielded was truly a sword of its own. I, too, want to fight like that. I may never understand what it's like for you to have lost your family. But, I know, our goals will one day be one and the same."

Pure to the very end. How unblemished Ruyan was.

"You really are soft-hearted."

Darius laughed. It was a laugh teetering on a scoff, but even so, Ruyan nodded with a bright smile, as he always would.

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A few years later, Darius returned to Solta, a warrior in his own right. Of course, with Ruyan at his side. The two of them wanted to bring their manpower to the fight against Morea. The war, centred around what was to be done about the Billiana Forest, was intensifying more with each day.

The village of Solta had become even more of a shadow than how it was in Darius's childhood memories.

The effect of the lack of food ran deep. It wasn't only the elderly, but children now, dropping dead from famine one after the other.

And the Billiana Forest, as if looking down upon the impoverished population, grew more lush than ever with no hint of stopping. And so did the people's hate towards the forest rise higher than ever before.

The Billiana Forest was sapping the nutrients from the earth, making the surrounding land wither away. It was of utmost importance to clear the Billiana Forest in order to make space for farmland as soon as possible. That line of thought had completely permeated the minds of the people. Now, the only ones who thought otherwise, was the village of Morea.

Fontraile, the entity that allied the four villages together, decided it was finally time to resume the logging of the Billiana Forest.

Of course, the only village that took a stance against this was Morea, and it was decided that they would be removed from the alliance. They became isolated, having been chased out from the others.

And so when the logging plan led by Fontraile went ahead, it was only natural that the Morean army would start opposing it to the very end. To Darius and Ruyan, having trained in swordplay to the point that swords were like extensions of their own bodies, being put in actual battles only served to improve their skills more.

And only in a matter of time, their mastery of swordplay earned them the name of "The Four Swordsmen."

The other two swordsmen were peculiarly interesting in their own ways. One of them was Felkin, a young man born in Solta, and whose father was the current leader of the village. He appeared to be a dashing young man nicknamed "The Hope of Solta," but in reality, he was a bit of a brat, with a childish side he hadn't grown out of yet. Felk was strongly opposed to everything and anything Morea stood for, as if an extension of his own father. In that one way, he and Darius shared the same views, but unfortunately, their personalities could not be more different. In short, they did not get along well.

The other swordsman was Saris, a mercenary who made his way to Edinbury from another continent entirely. With black hair, black eyes, and a large build, he could wield a broadsword effortlessly unlike anyone else. He was in his mid twenties or so, but his cunning knowledge was much beyond his years—just how many battlefields he'd trudged through, no one knew. Though no one doubted his strength, it was very clear from the way he acted that he was simply there for the money, which stood out clearly from the tight-knit Soltan soldiers. Even so, he didn't *not* get along with Darius. Perhaps they took solace in being curt and unfriendly together.

As the Four Swordsmen, the men conquered battle after battle. The overwhelming progress they contributed to the war helped Fontraile greatly, putting a great amount of pressure on the opposing Moreans.

There was just one last step for them. The remaining soldiers under the command of little miss Lestea. If they could finally strike her down, then Morea would finally be finished, and it would be the utter and complete victory of Fontraile.

But at the same time, Lestea's top-notch tactics on the battlefield were deliberate and pointed, and they were able to escape total destruction more than a handful of times.

And this time too, the pitiful conclusion of their wasp-filled surprise attack would only serve to make the Solta army more frustrated by the day.

Chapter 3

"We gotta get serious now. We will burn all of Morea to the ground, and kill every last damn person!"

Felk slammed his fist against the table as his voice rang loud and clear throughout the tent. The troops of the Solta Army were gathered together for a military meeting, spearheaded by the four swordsmen.

Save for Felk's loud outburst of anger, the soldiers in the room were deadly silent. All except for the quietest snicker, coming from someone in the crowd.

Of course, that certain someone was a mercenary by the name of Saris.

It was rare for him to join in such a crucial meeting, but as one of the four swordsmen alongside Felkin and Ruyan, and with a long line of war achievements under all their belts, it was reasonable for him to be there. Even if Saris was silently distant, as was his usual look outside of the battlefield.

Well, silent until now.

"So, you're laughing again?"

Felk shot a glare at Saris. He put up his trademark serious face in return.

"Not at all."

"No, you were laughing just now. And I'm very sure you were laughing at ME. I'd love to know what's so damn funny!"

The troops, who were very used to this conversation by now, simply watched to see where it would lead this time.

Saris placed his huge sword on his knee, and responded as if trying to stifle more laughter.

"'We gotta get serious now,' was it? Nice line. Guess everything up till now was just for fun and games."

"What're you...!?"

"We were supposed to be fighting seriously this whole time. Were you just half-assing it, I suppose?"

"Sure, take it like that. But what I mean is, this time for sure, I will bring ten thousand-fold more power, more seriousness, and the drive to kill every single last one of them!"

"Alright, then..."

Said Saris, who couldn't understand how Felk reached that kind of conclusion, and simply shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, good to know you've finally realised how formidable Lestea really is. Now, if you have something more to contribute than just 'killing every last damn person,' I'd be delighted to hear it."

"Shut your damn mouth first."

Felk grumbled, clicking his tongue.

Ruyan put himself in the middle of the two.

"It's true that Lestea is a formidable person. We'll have to be even more on alert than ever. And although it's frustrating that they got away, we've still got far more manpower than

them. As long as we keep our eyes open, carefully search for them, and then surround them, we will succeed."

"Great, but we don't even know where they're all off to now. Sure, they're small in numbers, but that's exactly how they keep hiding in the shadows..."

"The best way for us to lure Lestea out, is to step back from the battlefield, and resume the logging of the Billiana Forest."

Several people voiced agreement at Ruyan's words.

"Well... Once we're in there, they could easily launch an ambush on us disguised as Morean worshippers, and set us all ablaze..."

"The fire damage would be too risky for them, considering we'd all be surrounded by forest. So, if we started logging again at such a large scale, their hands would surely be forced. And then, at that moment, we'd have two troops, one on each side..."

Saris got up in the middle of Ruyan's explanation.

Ruyan shut his mouth. The mercenary was heading for the tent's exit.

"Wait a damn minute."

Felk stopped him.

"Where're you going, huh? We haven't finished talking yet."

"No, no, feel free to resume your talk once I leave."

Saris swung his sword over his shoulder, and smiled ever-so-faintly.

"The only thing I swing is my sword. Axes aren't in my job description. I'll pass."

"Oy, you fuckin'...!"

Felkin's voice rose to a fever pitch.

"Put some damn respect on our army, you violent lunatic. It's not all about swinging your sword like a madman on the battlefield. If you can't understand how important this meeting is, well, you're just a brat in an adult's body!"

Everyone looked at each other a little in disbelief, hearing those words come from the brat-in-an-adult's-body known as Felkin.

Saris turned heel and started to walk away, with a face that clearly said "no thanks."

Ruyan called to him this time.

"Saris. What Felk said is correct. Our goal isn't just to bring down Morea."

As he said that, Ruyan darted his eyes over to Darius.

Darius stayed silent.

"We want to protect people's homes, their lives, and make society a more plentiful place to be. That's why we're fighting, and it's why the Billiana Forest is so crucial to our plans."

"And that's why you guys should handle all that."

Saris responded, with a hint of tedium in his tone.

"I'm a mercenary. I only work on the battlefield. Regarding anything with the forest, I have nothing to do with it."

"That's not it, Saris. I know, you come from another continent, so it must be difficult to understand how we feel. But, this problem isn't just about Edinbury. We'd never fight this desperately out of some sense of pride or greed. One day, the Billiana Forest will end up covering the entire world, sapping up all the fertile soil beneath it. If we don't do something, sooner or later, every single living being will be gone because of this. It's more than just about Morea and Solta. Please, Saris, I'd like you to rethink this."

Ruyan's voice was calm, but behind those words was a quiet intensity.

Darius furrowed his eyebrows, just slightly. Those impassioned words about the dangers of the Billiana Forest bore a striking resemblance to the speeches his father once gave.

"No one knows how the Billiana Forest works."

Saris answered, his sober tone contrasting Ruyan's fervent speech.

"Morea preaches their own beliefs, too. And they were as passionate as you. They'd chirp on and on, all about it into my ears. I have no interest in whoever's right. The only thing I'm interested in is you all giving me work to do, and that I get paid."

Ruyan put a hand out to stop Saris, asking him a question.

“Saris. Would you repeat that, one more time? You... You’ve heard from Morea’s side before?”

Ruyan could see it on his face. A nonchalant, “I don’t know what you mean” kind of expression on the mercenary’s face.

“It’s what Morea’s always said, isn’t it? You’re telling me that you don’t know that? That none of you know why they’re always on about protecting the Billiana Forest?”

“That’s not what I mean. But, the way you spoke, it was almost as if you’ve heard firsthand the opinions of Moreans before.”

The people inside the tent silently exchanged glances with each other.

Ruyan hesitated a bit, but continued on with his questions.

“Saris. I’ve had a feeling about you for a while now, from the way you speak and act. I feel as if you know too much about Morea, and Lestea as well.

Please, just tell us, is it possible that you were once hired by the village of Morea...?”

Felk let out a low gasp, and spun his head towards Saris’s direction.

Saris let out a burst of laughter. A low, particular kind of laughter, deep within his throat.

No one said anything. Not even Felk, who nearly asked "what's so damn funny" on instinct.

Everyone was simply fixated on Saris's face, full of laughter. As if it was impossible to get any words out, those laughs coldly reverberated through the air.

"Saris."

Ruyan spoke, his face turning pale.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Because you asked such a trivial question with such a deadly serious face is all."

"Was it really so trivial?"

"Yeah, you... You all really..."

Saris stopped laughing, and looked out over the crowd. As if he was a single lonely commander behind enemy lines.

"You don't know how mercenaries work? What a naive little bunch I've been employed by. You see, I don't have any of those magnificent ideals or beliefs that you all do. I just fight for money. Even if I'm fighting with you lot in this army together, I really, absolutely, could not care less about your ideals or goals or whatever."

"Please answer the question. Were you previously employed by the Morea army?"

"I wasn't."

Saris promptly responded.

Catching a look at Felk's disappointed face, he continued on.

"I was requested to. But I declined."

"You...?"

"Well, to be more exact, it wasn't the Morea army that requested me. There was a certain person in the army who asked me to assassinate a certain somebody."

"Could you please tell us more, if you can?"

Ruyan inquired. He tried his best to act calm, but his unease showed through.

"I'm not so inclined to do that. I keep my clients anonymous. Mercenary's rules."

"But we're your clients now."

Saris simply shrugged as Ruyan goaded him further. *We'll pay you accordingly for what you know,* he promised.

Felk raised his voice.

"Oy, Ruyan, this guy's just taking advantage of us!"

"Please stop talking for a moment, Felk. Please, do tell us, Saris. Just what kind of request were you tasked with?"

Saris begrudgingly sat back down in his previous spot.

"My goodness, the lot of you. Alright, well, I didn't actually accept the request at the time. So I do suppose talking about this incident isn't a violation of any particular rules..."

Making a proper excuse for himself, Saris then raised his head.

His eyes turned to Ruyan.

Then to Felk.

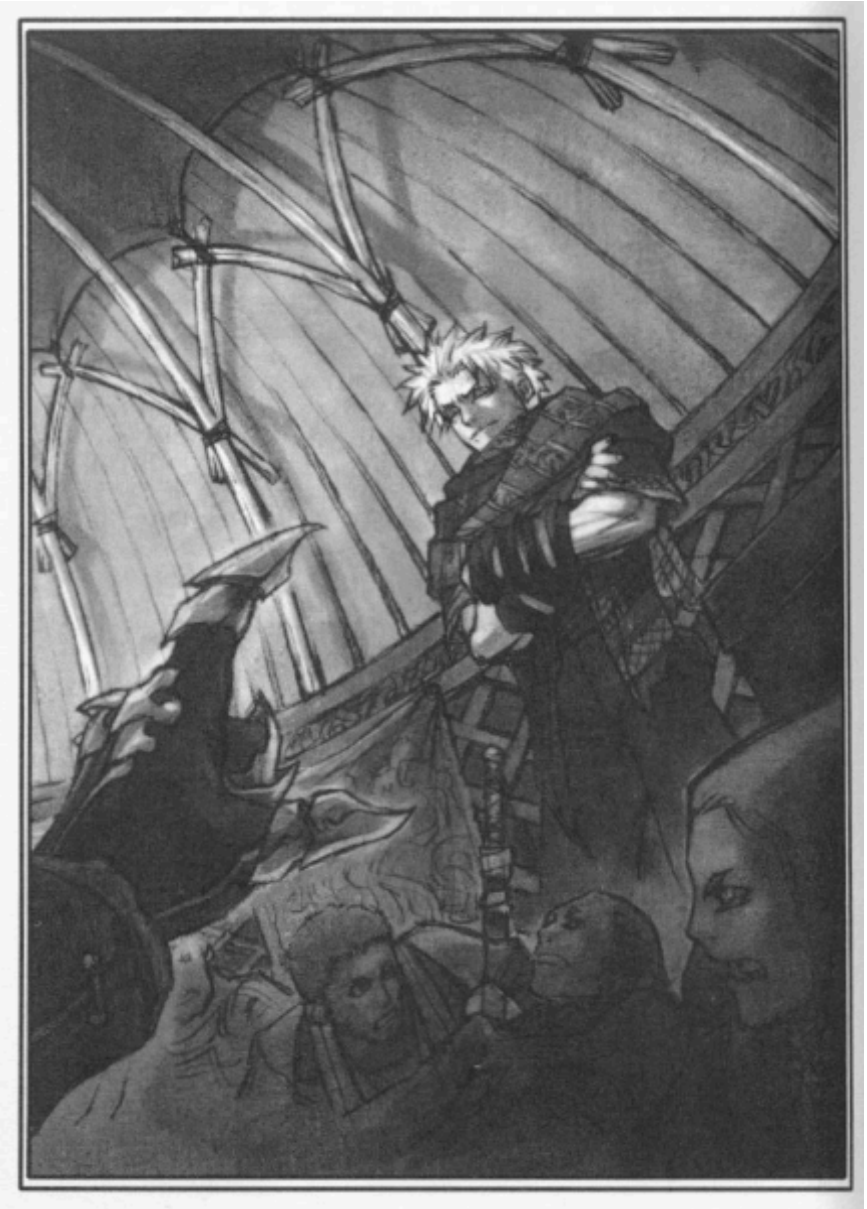
And finally, to Darius.

His glare was stern as he stared at him.

And then, Saris stuck out a finger.

In the corner of the tent—arms crossed as he quietly watched everything unfold.

"It's him. I was requested to kill him."



Saris's finger pointed to Darius.

Darius didn't move. But ever-so-slightly, he furrowed his deep-set eyebrows.[2]

Felk was speechless. And from the looks of it, he wasn't alone.

Only Ruyan spoke up.

"And who requested you to do that?"

"Lestea."

"And you refused her?"

"Yes."

[2] my bestie Cookie requested to keep the original line of "well shaped eyebrows" in but it was too late. rip

"Why?"

"Plain and simple. Her budget was too low."

"Budget?"

Saris seemed to remember something, and a smirk rose on his face.

"She really didn't seem to know how much it cost for mercenaries to kill someone. She wasn't the brightest one, offering me such a cheap price. I practically laughed at her all the way out the door—she wouldn't even negotiate with me, all white in the face. That was probably all she could afford."

"When did this happen?"

"Obviously, this happened before the Solta army hired me."

"If it was before now, then Lestea wouldn't have been an army commander yet..."

"Oh, you've got a point."

"Saris, please don't just agree along with me. For what reasons would an ordinary, civilian girl request a mercenary to assassinate somebody?"

"Oy, you!"

Before the mercenary had time to reply, Felk got his outburst out first.

"You tell us straight. Just when did you get this request? If it was after Lestea joined the army, then ya would've been working with the Solta army already. Don't tell me you've been secretly in contact with Morea this whole time!"

"...I give up with you lot."

Saris grumbled, picking something out of his ear. It very clearly gestured to the fact that he had no interest in explaining anything else.

"Something's not right."

Ruyan spoke. His usual, calm demeanour was replaced with a hardened expression, as if he was grimly facing an enemy in front of him.

"How did she come to know Darius's name at that time? Back then, he wasn't as well known as he is now. Not to mention, why she was aiming for his life..."

"Oy, Darius."

Felk's voice rang out. Darius kept his stare down, as if he was completely unrelated to the affairs that were transpiring.

"Don't tell me, you were acquainted with Lestea this whole time?"

He asked in a hesitant voice. It seemed that Felk's paranoia had spread, beginning from Saris, and now onto Darius.

Darius shook his head curtly.

"No."

"But how'd that bitch manage to find out your name, eh? We may be called the Four Swordsmen of Solta now, but not way back then... So, how...?"

Darius didn't respond. It was clear from the look on his face that he wasn't trying to feign ignorance about the situation at hand—he just didn't know. No one, not even himself, had a clue.

Ruyan pressed Saris further.

"So, back to how Lestea asked you to take on her request. Why did you wait until now to tell us about all of this?"

"Well, no one ever brought it up until now."

"Saris!"

"Really, I mean, it might make sense that Lestea didn't know anything about fees—but how do absolutely none of you know how mercenaries are hired, either?"

Saris chided as he spoke.

"If you're going to put your trust into wandering mercenaries, one ought to research their background before hiring them, don't you think? If I was truly, really a spy for the Morea army, well, what are you all going to do about it?"

No one answered him in return.

And as all the hostile stares of the troops simply rolled off his back, Saris made his leave from the tent. Nobody stopped him anymore.

The military meeting had taken a sharp turn for the worse. Finishing off the last of the Morea army was the last thing on anyone's minds, now.

Felk tried to break the painful silence that weighed down on everyone.

"We really can't trust him, eh..."

"Felk."

Ruyan tried to stop him, but Felk simply couldn't bear it any longer.

"We gotta fire him. We ought to do away with him, and fast. He's an absolute risk to everyone here. And I know he must be working with Morea... "

"But, the Solta army needs his manpower."

"How can you be so wishy-washy?! Who knows if he'll just go back to Lestea's side? Don't come crying to me if you wake up one day to see Darius's head lopped off his body!"

Ruyan couldn't even bring himself to respond to that vulgar choice of words.

Everyone looked to Darius. Same as usual, his eyes were pointed straight at the ground. Although, after hearing Felk's remarks, he did rub the back of his neck.

"...That's a bit morbid."

He wryly muttered under his breath.

Felk implored further.

"Are you seriously not disturbed by all this? Just why, why would Lestea..."

Darius didn't answer, and headed straight for the tent's exit.

And though Felkin yelled at him to stop, while Ruyan tried to smooth things over, he just kept on walking.

Saris was in a small tent that the army had provided for him.

Darius called out to him, lifting the heavy flap of the tent's entrance.

The mercenary had rolled out a mat in the corner of the tent, sitting upon it and polishing his large sword as usual.

"Hope I'm not bothering anything."

Saris put down his sword to his side, as if in response to Darius.

Darius took a seat in front of him.

And for a while, it was silent on both sides. It was only after Darius expertly squashed a fly buzzing around him before he finally opened his mouth to speak.

"It's been half a year since we started to hear Lestea's name thrown around so frequently."

"—Indeed."

Saris had not a single drop of friendliness in his replies.

"A young girl at the head of the Morea army. With the way she's helping them rebound, she just might be hailed a war hero—a heroine, perhaps. We thought at first it was just something to scoff at. But her name spread, and fast. Her troops are about the only ones in the Morea army without a losing streak."

"Yeah."

"And I have never met with her."

Saris watched Darius closely. Far different than when he had to put up with Felk's antics, the Darius before him now had a deep look on his face, engrossed in his thoughts.

"I've caught glimpses of her on the battlefield, but that's it. And to be blunt, she wasn't that great with a sword. She knows the techniques, but her physical strength doesn't match her knowledge. If she was put on the frontlines, it probably wouldn't turn out well.

But, she's a smart one. It's like the Morean soldiers are extensions of her own limbs, and with that dexterity she can lead them all to victory. It's no small feat. Not to mention, she's most likely around the same age that I am."

"Indeed."

"And at that age, leading a battalion like that, is certainly not something anyone can do. Even for me and Ruyan, they hardly took us seriously when we first started in the army. For her to have climbed to such a high rank in such a short time, she has to be extremely skilled—she's undoubtedly passionate for the battlefield."

Saris nodded his head.

Darius tilted his head before starting his questions anew.

"Just what compels her to aim so high, I wonder. Does she want to protect the Billiana Forest that desperately? No, it can't be as simple as that..."

"....."

"It's just so strange that she came up to you to request to kill me."

Darius glanced over at Saris's sword for a moment. That sword must have been splattered with the blood of others a countless number of times.

"Back then, no one knew of my name. I was just another soldier in a sea of many. If one wanted to stop the Solta army dead in its tracks, then—right, targeting someone like Felk would be far more effective, I'm sure. He's the son of the head of Solta. They call him 'The Hope of Solta,' like he's the hero of our army. If it was him, the Morea army would've known him by name long ago..."

"They're giving out the hero title to just about anyone nowadays, I take it?"

"Hey now, I'm being serious here."

Darius smirked, as he continued on.

"But in the end, Lestea targeted a no-name soldier like me. How did she get to know me? What made her think she had to kill me?"

Darius sat straight up, and looked head-on at Saris.

"Well..."

Saris turned his eyes away.

"I wasn't interested in hearing what Lestea had to say. Before she got too deep into it, I rejected her request without a second thought, really. So I myself have no idea why she asked for you. The only thing I remember about her is the impression she gave me.

Pure, unbridled hatred. I have to wonder what kind of personal hell that little missy had gone through—what made her so full of loathing. There is no way her goals are as noble as protecting the forest or her village. It was hatred, pure and simple, born from the fiery pits of rage. As if her sole wish was to wipe her opponent off the face of the earth. That was the kind of morbid hatred she gave off."

Darius listened on with a steely face.

Saris shook his head, as if trying to shake away the stifling hate that lingered in the air.

"Pretty amusing, actually. When I first met you, Lestea came to mind as well."

"...Huh?"

"You and her quite resemble each other somehow. You're obsessed with destroying everything and anything to do with Morea. Unlike Ruyan or Felkin, the kind of guys who believe in themselves and what's right, you are clearly different. Nothing to do with upstanding morals or whatever, but fighting for the sake of your own hatred. Well, that's my opinion.

Heh, it really fits. The little girl from Morea, and the little boy from Solta, how curious it is that you two resemble each other so well..."

Darius shot a look of irritation at Saris, who simply smirked back.

"If I think about it now, it's probably best that it all turned out like this. After all, if I took her request, and approached you with an intent to kill... Well, I'd probably be six feet under by now, thanks to that Crest of yours."

"...That isn't something that I can control at will."

"Either way, it seems like I've narrowly escaped from the jaws of death this time, all thanks to a certain lady's lack of funds."

And as if signalling the end of the conversation, Saris placed the sword back into his hands.

Darius stood up, and without another word, left the tent.

BONUS: I liked how much Darius's personality was shown through in this chapter and it was really moe. So here you go.

Chapter 4

Noticing the tips of her fingers glowing with light, the girl looked up.

The librarian had adjusted the lamp at the other end of the table for her. The man, hair speckled with white, realised that he'd disturbed the girl's reading and gave an apologetic smile to her.

"Oh, I'm sorry for having bothered you. I thought it would be better to have some light, or your eyesight could worsen from reading all those words in the dark."

The girl blinked for a few seconds before uttering a word of thanks back to him.

It took some time for her to readjust back to the now-darkened library, far different from the world of the book that had unknowingly sucked her in.

The library patrons that came and went were all gone now, leaving only the girl and the librarian.

She straightened her back and twisted her neck a few times, each time making a cracking noise. After sitting in that spot for so long, her body had become all stiff.

"Quite a bookworm you are."

"Yes."

"Is that book so enthralling?"

"Well..."

Keeping the conversation going was troublesome, though she didn't want to be rude.

Rather, the less attention, the better for them both. She hoped that her reply would send the librarian somewhere else to roam.

But the librarian simply had too much free time on his hands, and continued looking her way as if ruminating about conversation topics in his head. The girl turned her gaze down, ignoring the harsh brightness of the lamp.

[Feel free to imagine the librarian looking like the one from Hakumei and Mikochi. thank you.]

The librarian's overly enthusiastic look only sowed a seed of worry in her heart.

Don't be ridiculous. They wouldn't have set up a perimeter in the library of Seclue, of all places.

She rectified her thought.

No, it's not like my identity's been revealed by anyone, or at least, it shouldn't be...

Where her long, waist-length hair used to be was now hair cut short to her neck.

And that so-called fiery red hair had been dyed a deep black.

She couldn't change her face, but the men's clothes she usually donned had been exchanged for a plain skirt, the kind that any townswoman would wear. And a bright shade of lipstick.

He shouldn't know. His face didn't look like it belonged on a battlefield, facing her in combat. He was just a normal librarian that had nothing to do with war.

Lestea brushed away the unease she felt from the librarian's gaze.

"Well then, what are you reading?"

"An old book."

"Oh, a book on the history of the Lost Empire, I see."

"Yes."

Lestea tried not to smile too widely.

"Well, I'll be. I thought that a young lady like you would've preferred a more pleasant story than that."

"I suppose I'm kind of a history buff."

Lestea spoke, as jovially as she could muster.

"Oh, is that so? I'm delighted to hear that. The younger generation these days don't have an appreciation of our past, and because of that, well..."

"Sir, I'm very sorry, but would it be all right if I was left alone? I'm just at a very interesting part in this book. I'd like to continue reading it."

"Oh! Well, my apologies."

The librarian nodded his head and headed back to his workspace.

Lestea stealthily watched him as he carried away with his work.

He didn't seem to notice. If she needed to, she could probably quietly slip out of the library without him realising.

He was at his desk, working along steadfastly as he began to sort through a pile of books.

With a bit of relief, Lestea turned her attention back to her book.

***

The Lost Empire of Rieubane.

When was the first time she heard that name? It must've been a day, a day terribly far ago, back when her memories were fuzzy and distant.

Her father was always the one telling her those stories. A little girl, sitting atop her father's knee, a certain picture book wide open as he began to tell its story anew.

Even now, those particular memories still flashed with brilliance.

That picture book was a hand-me-down from her father. He had purchased it when he was a child, when Morea was still somewhat of a happy little village to live in.

The outside cover had faded with age, and its spine was nearly in tatters, an old book in all—but opening the book was all it took to be greeted with lush sceneries.

Drawings of streets bursting with people.

Royal palaces, sketched in pure white.

Neatly lined rows of trees along the road.

Glossy fruits and vegetables stacked high outside storefronts.

And the people, adorned in magnificent fabrics.

This scenery was so very far away from the poor village that Lestea had lived in. The little girl gazed at the picture book countless times, transfixed with its illustrations of unimaginable abundance.

"Long long ago, Rieubane was a grand country on the continent of Edinbury. By conquering the villages all around its borders, it grew ever bigger and became incredibly prosperous."

As her father spoke of this legendary empire, his voice rose to a fever much like an impassioned young boy. Lestea loved it when her father spoke like that.

"However, there were also those who fought against Rieubane. Their numbers were small, and their weapons were quite ordinary, but the army of Rieubane simply couldn't defeat them, no matter how hard they tried."

"Why?"

"Within their numbers was a single hero. This man had unspeakable strength, and on his lonesome, he could take on thousands of soldiers and come out victorious. The people of Rieubane put their heads together to figure out how this one person could be so powerful."

"How'd he do it?"

"This hero... He had a particular marking."

Lestea stayed silent as her father quietly continued.

"Yes. He had the Crest. And because of the Crest's powers, this hero could manifest an incredible amount of strength."

Lestea craned her neck to look up at her father, as he flipped the page and continued.

"The people of the empire thought and thought. If they could research that mark, then surely they could finally stop him once and for all. And with that, they headed off into the Billiana Forest."

"The forest?"

"Yes, the forest. For the Billiana fruit had a mysterious power within. If one were to extract its insides and concentrate it, they'd end up with something called 'Palmira.' And while one could use Palmira to make the most fantastical weapons, it would be incredibly difficult for a normal person to wield it.

But, to the Crest-bearing hero, commanding the powers of Palmira was an easy feat for him. So, if the researchers could combine the powers of the Crest and Palmira together, they'd have the most powerful soldier that ever lived, wouldn't they?

And so, the empire kept on researching, and soon enough, they had managed to create a mark that worked remarkably similar to the Crest. But, the researchers were greedy. They wanted to have more and more power, and set off to invade the forest."

"They went into the Billiana Forest?"

Lestea trembled.

The huge forest was very, very close to the village of Morea, where the little girl lived. It was absolutely forbidden to go into such a sacred place, as she was once told.

They actually went into *that* Billiana Forest, of all places?

"What happened to them?"

"They were punished by our Mother, of course. It was like Rieubane had attacked the Billiana Forest, so in response... The entire empire was destroyed but in a single moment."

Lestea let out a sigh of relief.

The bad guys always lose. For the Billiana Forest was still as green and lush as ever.

Although, there was just one more thing on her mind.

"Dad, but what about Palmira? If we use the Billiana fruit, can we still make Palmira now?"

"No, we can't."

Her father put on a stiff smile.

"When the empire of Rieubane was destroyed, so did all the research along with it. We just don't know how to do any of that anymore."

"Oh..."

Lestea was a little downcast.

"But, those Crestbearers, they could still use Palmira with no problem even now, right?"

"—Well, I did say that, but..."

"So, so, that means even I could—"

Suddenly, Lestea's father pulled his daughter into a hug, shaking his head.

"Don't think about those kinds of things."

"Why?"

"Didn't I just say? The research that the empire of Rieubane did is all gone, and nobody will ever know how they were able to use Palmira."

"But, the Billiana Forest is still here, maybe we could start up a new resear—"

"Please stop thinking about it, Lestea."

Her father's face was rarely fearful.

But this time, it was.

"It's just a fairy tale. The stuff of legends."

"Yeah, but..."

The Billiana Forest was still standing as strong as ever, unlike those old legends. Lestea could see its huge expanse clear as day from the window of her house.

And the Crest.

Just like that hero of ancient times, Lestea too, had that same mark unmistakably etched on her body.

It just wasn't any old fairy tale.

But if Lestea said that, her father would become even more stern, and so she kept those words inside.

And with her mouth shut, and nothing else she could do, she turned her attention back to the picture book.

With a flip of the page, those bustling townscapes of Rieubane turned into the landscape of a dense, lush forest.

Each leaf was painstakingly painted, layer after layer. The multitudes of green overlapped and blended together, Lestea almost could feel the refreshing breeze course through her.

"The Billiana Forest is a very important place."

Lestea's father dropped his voice down to a whisper.

"If that forest weren't here, we wouldn't be able to survive. And what grows in the forest aren't just simple, normal trees. The Billiana is the Mother of All Things. It gives life to everything, purifies everything, and gives us all the strength to live."

Lestea lightly traced the painted forest with her fingers. Such a brilliant and deep green could almost stain her own fingers the same colour, she thought.

Her father's words were nothing new, though—he had spoken it countless times, repeating it over and over to her. The Billiana was the centre of the world.

A sacred forest.

"...Dad?"

Lestea timidly spoke out.

"Yes?"

"Is it true what they say... That the Billiana Forest is the reason our soil is getting poorer?"

Still wrapped in an embrace, Lestea could feel the moment her father's arms stiffened up.

Oh no, I must've made him upset...

Lestea, regretful as she was, couldn't take those words back. She kept on talking, to try and elaborate.

"It's the Billiana Forest's fault that our village is in poverty, isn't it? The forest takes all the nutrients for itself, which is why we can't grow anything at all. Isn't that the truth? Isn't it weird? If the Billiana Forest's supposed to give us all the strength to survive, then why are we all hurting so much instead?"

Living in Morea was, indeed, painful. And it only got worse as the years continued to go on. Even Lestea, young as she was, was aware of this. Even though her parents tried as hard as

they could to make sure their children didn't have to go through so much hardship, they all knew it well. Her mother would often, wordlessly, slide part of her meal onto Lestea's plate.

And then there was her brother, two years older, who passed away from illness. That's what they had said. But the true root of that was the poverty they lived in. Because they were poor, they hardly had anything of ample nutrition to eat. And buying medicine was simply unthinkable. Her brother's last words were a pained moan in his feverish sleep.

"Dad."

Lestea couldn't stop anymore. She held onto her father's arm tightly.

"Is the Billiana Forest really so important? Is it really protecting us? If we cut down that forest to make more farmland, could all of us be saved?"

"Lestea."

Her father had anger in his voice now. He raised his hand.

Lestea flinched for a moment. But the man did not hit his daughter.

Rather, he hugged Lestea who was still sitting on his knee, as if to snap her back to reality.[3]

He opened his mouth to speak.

"Is that really what you thought up? I don't think you would. Who did you hear that from? Just who was it that said all those things?"

"....."

"I won't get mad. Just tell me."

Timidly, Lestea spoke the name of Gastall. A teenager who lived nearby.

He was a smart, if somewhat standoffish teenager who often had many things to tell Lestea. He seldom worked in the fields and chose rather to spend his time idly, which garnered plenty of ill will from the villagers, but to Lestea he was a knowledgeable young man—one that she was quite fond of.

—The Billiana isn't some Mother of all Things or whatever. It's really quite the opposite. That thing is the root of all evil.

[3] extort? or raise up?

Gastall spoke with a sober tone in front of Lestea. And even when those words shocked her, all he did was shrug his shoulders with a cynical smile on his face.

—Everyone living in this dinky village's got their heads up their asses. But you see, I've heard that Solta's actually been thinking towards the future. If this keeps up, I bet you Morea's just gonna be swept up by the waves of progress... And fall into ruins.

Lestea was a little scared of Gastall's words, but she just couldn't bring herself to dismiss all of it as hogwash.

However, her father rebuked her thoughts with a stern face.

"Do not speak with that boy again."

"……Why?"

"He's a good-for-nothing bum that spends his time spewing garbage instead of actually working."

Lestea's father spoke as if bitter contempt was flowing from his mouth.

She'd never seen her father this angry before—certainly not the father she'd always known as kind-hearted and gentle. Behind that stern face, however, was an even stronger sense of faith.

He must be right.

My father must be on the right side of things, Lestea believed.

—Which means Gastall must be wrong after all.

—Because that's just what cynical people do. They reject anything that's right and make up their own line of logic to fit their selfish needs.

Then one day, Gastall was caught up in a fight and was seriously injured. They said it started with someone bumping into another, or something small like that, but it ended up with several youths beating him until he was on the ground.

It was a small impetus, but in the backdrop of everything, there was no doubt that Gastall ended up that way due to everyone else's hostility.

The people of Morea hated Gastall for all the contemptuous words he spoke, and on that day it simply exploded into something else. In the middle of it all, there were said to be

several people from the village who witnessed it, but not one person stepped in to stop the attacks.

In any normal circumstance, if one were to pile onto such a brutal assault, that would be grounds for crimes. Gastall was the victim here. That should've been clear as day.

But the actual perpetrators didn't get a single shred of punishment. Any sort of investigation fell by the wayside. The only thing that came out of the incident was a stern talking-to.

The only one met with cold eyes was the victim himself. Gastall, despite hardly being able to walk in his injured state, would still be met with a sudden, threatening silence at any village establishment he visited.

After a few days, Gastall ultimately left the village. As his parents realized how his gaze was always transfixed on a certain nearby village, they spoke of severing family ties with their own son.

Lestea felt a small pain in her chest, but more than that, a large feeling of relief.

It was for the better. No more would she feel such conflicted emotions every time his figure came into view. No more chills down her spine as they spoke together, the stares of every villager boring into her.

The day before Gastall left, he paid a visit to Lestea's house to say his final goodbyes, but was staunchly turned back by Lestea's father.

Lestea was holed up in her room, nowhere to be seen.

She was angry with herself, filled with guilt and shame, left alone with a swirl of unpleasant feelings. A familiar feeling, though, for that was the same miserable atmosphere that permeated the village of Morea.

Feelings of guilt as dissenters were swarmed and beaten.

Incredulous reasons thrown around to justify brazen hate.

Morea was beginning to warp and twist, just a bit more, with each passing day.

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The number of times her father slipped out of the house without so much of a word grew to a point where Lestea could just notice it.

There were times when he would leave in the dead of night and arrive home in the early hours of the day. There were also times when men would gather in Lestea's home, faces sullen with darkness.

They would whisper among themselves about things she had no idea of, bringing a heavy sense of anxiety and depression throughout the entire place.

Lestea hated these men. The way her father swirled in the middle of these conversations, she simply hated it. And, more than the others, it seemed like her father was the one directing them all.

Solta.

Billiana.

These words would occasionally leak out of their conversations, reaching Lestea's ears.

Lestea would try to eavesdrop as much as she could but, after being caught one time, she was politely sent out of the house to do errands by her mother.

Solta was the name of the village closest to Morea. And, regarding the matters of the Billiana Forest, they had been at odds with Morea for a long, long time.

The teenager chased out of Morea, Gastall, was a strong supporter of Solta.

But to Lestea, the mere mention of the place was like a sinister curse to her.

One day, Lestea found a sharp sort of thing in her father's room. She had entered his room simply to just borrow a book from him, and right there beside her father's desk, it was there.

Her heart skipped a beat. It was nothing like the hatchets or axes they used in daily life. Clear as day, it was a blade, sharp with a pointed tip at the end—a sword.

What use does he have for a thing like this? No... What's he going to use this on?

And as Lestea stood there, frozen in place, her father walked in.

Her father scolded her, as a daughter who shouldn't barge into their father's rooms, and sternly told her not to speak to anyone else about this.

"Dad. What're you going to use this for?"

Lestea pointed at the sword, having screwed up all her courage to ask that to her father.

“It’s better if you don’t know.”

Her father, with a sullen face, wrapped the leather around the sword many times before he put it back into the drawer, firmly shut tight.

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Lestea could still remember clearly the day her life turned pitch black.

Her father had gone out the previous night, and while such a thing wasn't uncommon, her mother was especially quiet that day, with a worried look on her face as if something had happened.

“Where did dad go?”

And even as Lestea asked such a question off-handedly, her mother could only reply with ambiguous answers.

The house feels especially tense today, with that look on mom's face...

Even the slightest sound of footsteps made the tension all the more unbearable.

Something bad was going to happen. Something bad was going to happen to dad.

She couldn’t stop herself from thinking that. That a terrible thing was going to happen.

And then, all of a sudden, that thing became true. The news came late at night, when Lestea had gone to bed. Her sleep was shallow, as her eyes shot straight open the moment she heard noises from the front door.

There were several pairs of footsteps, all busy and hurried. Lestea practically sprang out of her bedroom.

Her mother was collapsed on the floor, sobbing. Around her stood several men, trying to approach her.

Her mother was being attacked by intruders. Lestea believed this, and ran towards the men with a yell.

The men, however, stopped her at once and tried to settle her down.

With a grave tone, one spoke.

“Please prepare yourself for what I’m about to say, and listen carefully.”

“Your father has died.”

Lestea’s mother wailed despondently once more, and Lestea herself seized up.

More than being shocked, was a feeling of numbness, a blunt pain that struck her from the pit of her stomach.

I knew it.

Lestea dared not say it, but in her heart she knew instantly. It was like her worst fears had all come true.

“Where’s my dad?”

Lestea pleaded with the men as she asked. They could only shake their heads in response.

“Why? Where is he? I want to see him. Let me see him!”

The last words she spoke came out like a shriek. Lestea’s mother could only hug her daughter tightly.

In the end, without knowing how, without knowing why, Lestea and her mother were all alone now. Without a hint of relent, daybreak came, bringing with it a new, frightening world.

By the time it was midday, they had learned more about the incident.

Her father had been killed. The perpetrator was someone from Solta.

Even more, Lestea’s father was not the only one who had been killed. Five more men from Morea lost their lives in one night.

This was not a normal situation by any means. Lestea could only listen, dumbfounded. The day she found her father’s sword, the fearful expression he had on his face, all those things came to mind.

“Why? Why did my father go to a place like Solta? Why was he killed? Who would do such a terrible thing?”

The adults around Lestea did not answer a single of her questions. They would not even answer when she asked why her father's remains didn't come back.

Lestea's mind was stuck, swirling with questions.

But things continued to happen all around her.

As Lestea's mother continued weeping over her dead husband, countless adults she didn't know paid a visit to Lestea's house. They spoke of things she didn't understand, with difficult expressions on their faces.

"Your father was a hero. A hero for the sake of Morea."

Someone whispered, in hushed tones.

That alone sent Lestea into a trail of thoughts.

Her father was a hero because he died. No, not *died*, he was killed. Killed in the enemy territory known as Solta.

He must've gone with a reason. A violent reason. In all likelihood, to stop someone's wicked plans to cut down the Billiana Forest.

But he had lost the battle, and was slain because of it.

Of course, Lestea was sad. She had cried out in tears, too.

But, after those feelings of grief, was to come something much, much larger.

She would soon come to realize that her father hadn't died an honourable death.

And soon, she would be thrown into a bottomless spiral of despair.

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It became a kind of taboo to speak of Lestea's father and the other men who were killed alongside him.

Everyone would avoid the topic if it ever came up. It wasn't as if their bereaved families were looked upon with scorn by the villagers, but there was this feeling. A strong feeling that they were like porcelain dolls, not to be held, not to be told anything bad, and it wasn't comforting.

Far from it, Lestea thought. *How extremely strange.*

If her father had died a hero, they shouldn't be acting so evasively, shouldn't they? If they really sympathized with him, they should be speaking more about her father, shouldn't they?

Lestea tried to dig deeper into the truth behind her father's death, but the people who seemed like they knew kept their mouths shut.

She didn't ask her mother, either. After her father's death, her mother seemed to be even weaker, thinner, as if she had fallen ill. If Lestea dared ask if her mother knew anything more about it, she feared that her mother would finally break once and for all.

Lestea ruminated, searching for people she could ask questions to.

And out of the blue, came one unlikely person.

Gastall. That young man who everyone thought had left the village, slipped through the commotion that had befallen the villagers, and suddenly made an appearance again.

Forgoing a return to his family home, he borrowed a small room, taking residence in a dilapidated house. Just like before, however, he refused to socialize with anyone, the doors of the house kept firmly shut. Rarely ever would he show his face where people gathered.

Once the rumour of Gastall's return reached Lestea's ears, she made a decision to go and visit him.

Gastall knew everything. And although he was cynical, he was one of the only people who wouldn't talk down to a child like Lestea. Even if the villagers wouldn't approach them, he would certainly be able to tell Lestea something.

Gastall was surprised to see Lestea pay him a visit, but welcomed her in happily.
He could faintly sense the reason she had called for him. Before she could even open her mouth, he broke the silence first.

"A shame about your father, huh."

"...Yeah."

Lestea nodded.

Gastall dragged his foot along the ground as he walked, no doubt an aftereffect from the attack he suffered. Lestea gestured to a simple chair for him to use, and sat in the chair opposite to him.

"Gastall. Do you know anything?"

Lestea asked, looking straight at Gastall without a second thought.

"About what?"

"What happened when my father died. I was told that he was killed by people in Solta, but no one will tell me anything more. Just what happened there? Do you know?"

"...Ohh."

Gastall raised his eyebrows. His ghastly, cynical expression hadn't changed a bit.

"You really didn't hear anything?"

"No one will tell me anything. They won't even let me see my father's remains."

"I see... So that's how they're doing it, eh?"

Gastall nodded, with a clearly superior look on his face.

Lestea pressed on with a higher tone in her voice.

"Tell me everything you know. Who killed my father? Why my dad? Why was it Solta?"

"And what. What'll you do if you know the truth?"

"What... Will I do?"

Lestea suddenly found herself stuck on those words.

She hadn't thought about that before. Of course, she wanted to learn the truth behind it all. But, somehow, a particular answer came to her, as if by instinct.

"I want to take revenge, of course."

"You do?"

"Of course I do! I want payback for the bastards who killed my father!"

"You ought to stop while you're ahead."

A slight smile crept up on Gastall's face. Lestea's voice grew even louder in frustration.

"I don't wanna hear that from you. If you know something about my father, spit it out already! Do you know what it feels like being left in the dark like this?!"

"Okay, okay, just calm down a little..."

Gastall lowered his hands, trying to diffuse the irritation in Lestea's voice.

She could only glare back at him.

"Look, I'll tell you, if you wanna know so badly. But, I'll just say this once, it's not gonna be fun to listen to..."

"Tell me."

"Okay. So, about why they keep deflecting when you wanna talk about your dad..."

Gastall leaned over the table, whispering closer to Lestea.

"You see, there's a reason why everyone's suddenly gone against your father and the things he's done. Your father's got the work of preaching about the forest. But when he's foisted into actually putting that into action, everyone just scrunches their face and turns the other way. That's just how everything in this scummy village works."

Gastall's lips curled up a bit.

Lestea furrowed her brows.

"...I don't get it. What are you getting at?"

"Basically, in everyone's eyes, your father's become a symbol of disgust that's tarnished the whole village. Because, he's the one that stooped to such a low level that he'd kill a bunch of Soltans head-on. Low enough to even target children."

Lestea's eyes opened wide. And in response, Gastall's eyes narrowed, as if partaking happily in her shock.

"You really didn't know anything, huh? Well, no wonder."

And then, Gastall told Lestea everything. Everything that happened in Solta. What Lestea's father and his group had done, and how they had died. In the most matter-of-fact tone, he continued to speak. On and on.

As Lestea continued to listen, she could feel her whole body starting to tremble. From the extremities of her toes, to the back of her neck, she could feel a terrifying chill all over. The hazy imaginings that she had of her father's death had been completely blown away now.

"I... No..."

It was all Lestea could whimper out once Gastall's speech was finished.

"It... It can't be... My father died with honour... He died fighting in battle..."

"I can see why you'd want to think that."

"But, you're saying, he did such a cowardly thing, an ambush on an entire... Why..."

"C'mon, Lestea, don't you understand? Why else isn't anyone saying anything to you?"

Gastall glanced her way with his usual cynical expression.

Those last words were all it took to finally send Lestea down a deep, spiralling pit.

Lestea buried her face in her hands, unable to face the truth anymore. Smothering her emotions as much as she smothered her face in tears.

It was sad for her father to have died. But if Lestea thought of it as an honourable death, she believed that she could've been able to accept it and slowly move forward in her life. But it just wasn't meant to be. Her father was a killer, a cold-blooded killer, to have burst into a family's happy life and slaughter them all, even to raise a sword against a child—

"Lestea, think about it."

Gastall placed his hands on the table and began to speak.

"Who's the real cowardly one here? Your father? I don't think so. Not in the slightest."

Such a strong conviction. Lestea slowly lowered her hands, and looked up to face Gastall.

"If not him, someone was bound to do this one way or another. If your father actually succeeded, and came back to the village, I bet you he would be hailed as a hero by now. But because he failed, everybody treats him as this terrible, unspeakable villain.

It's funny, isn't it? Everyone thinks they have the right to judge your father now, even though no one has the balls to do what he actually did."

"...But..."

Lestea was surprised. To see the cynical Gastall actually stand up for her father with words like that was something she didn't expect from him.

"I'm just someone who couldn't stand living among those who refuse to get their hands dirty. Lest they face the ugly reality, is all."

Gastall elaborated, the usual bitterness in his tone.

Lestea got up from her seat and, slowly, staggered out of the room.

Those words that Gastall pushed on her, to "think about it," ruminated in her head endlessly. The words hardly reached her at first, but slowly, unconsciously, they carved an impact deep within her.

I have to think about it.

Who was the real coward here? Was her father really, truly a wicked assassin, striking families deep at night?

As if lost in a nightmare, Lestea made her way back home, somehow trudging through the thick fog that pervaded her mind.

Skipping supper, locked up in her room, she laid in bed, continuing to think. Faced with her thoughts, there was one scene that played over and over.

The thought of a young boy, the only remaining survivor, standing alone amidst a massacre.

What kind of person was he? Just what had happened around him?

He had to be the key to the mysteries that swirled around her father's death.

It had to be him.

And that boy, Gastall had said, bore a mysterious marking on the back of his hand.

Lestea gripped the right side of her chest. As if a painful, heavy stone was bringing it down.

Underneath her garments, was a marking that had been with her since the day she was born.

Her father often told her, over and over again.

"You must never tell anyone else about this. Many people out there still believe it to be a mark of misfortune. If word spreads about you having that mark, people might tease you. So you must never let anyone know about this."

Lestea clutched her hands into her chest and cried.

Her father had always worried about her, and raised her with love. Lestea's memories cascaded down her mind. Her emotions had solidly frozen ever since she heard the news of her father's death. Now, those tears had finally thawed, and she sobbed long into the night.

There were more to her tears than just sadness. Her father's shame. Her rage against the villagers. Frustration. Hate. All those bitter emotions exploded within her.

And in time, that thawed hate and rage in her heart would re-solidify into a refined, crystalline mineral. A sharpened gem, of course, pointed at that boy from Solta.

That monster who bore the Crest.

That monster who tore apart her father in the blink of an eye.

That who shared the same pain as her, the same marking as the one on her chest.

All the more reason for her hate to whip up in flames.

After that, Lestea spent days and nights eating little, sleeping less, for her occasional bouts of sleep were attacked by nightmares that would often have her screaming awake.

Fear and rage swirled within her over and over, like a vicious cycle.

And when the day came that she finally snapped out of it, the day she finally left her bed, she had just one goal in her mind.

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From that day on, Lestea became an entirely new person, and started working as if a fire lit underneath her.

Up until then, she had helped out around the house and nearby places, but she'd never done manual labour to earn a wage.

She went around shops and farmhouses, asking and searching for work that she could do.

“Since my father's died, my mother's had nothing but hardships. I want to treat her to a good meal once in a while, which is why I need the money.”

With those sweet words, Lestea did find those who sympathised with her.

Although, Lestea did feel a twinge of guilt.

Lestea’s desire to work was, truly, a way to support her and her mother's livelihood, but that wasn't the only reason. But she never spoke about that, and by playing the brave little girl, she was able to find better work than usual.

Drawing water, harvesting, sewing, serving at bars, she did anything she could. And Lestea found that she was naturally skilled with her fingers, with good stamina to boot. Given the time, she found herself doing most any work with ease.

Without so much as a single word of complaint, she put everything into work, gaining a reputation of being a handyman among the villagers.

But despite all that, she could sense that neither she nor her mother could ever be a part of the other villagers ever again. It was never really something as clear as bullying, but with her father gone, they would always stand out within the village, never to be perceived as normal again. It was as if they were just like strangers, to be treated with a strange coldness.

Lestea didn’t pay it any heed, however. Her bigger concern was her mother, who had become another woman entirely in reaction to the villagers. A horrible change.

Oftentimes, her mother would burst out in complaints.

Your father just had to go and do such a foolish thing, didn't he.

It must be so difficult to walk through the roads with your head down, isn’t it, Lestea?

Lestea couldn’t stand it anymore. It was just one time, she shouted back at her mother “you don’t understand anything at all,” but it became a full-blown argument.

You can't just blame dad for everything!

But no matter how many times Lestea tried to make her mother understand that, it was impossible. Her mother was weary and so deeply hurt that she simply lost all hope. Lestea

tried to treat her mother to good food with the money she'd earned, but, far from being happy, she simply sighed and turned her back to her daughter, as if an intolerable presence.

Years passed by. Her mother grew weaker by the day, passing the hours sleeping and waking, over and over. Until one day, as if a flower withering, she quietly passed away. On that morning, before Lestea could even open the windows to her mother's bedroom, her body had already grown cold.

They said her mother died from heartbreak. Lestea likened it to suicide.

For the woman who hid from the world and lived her life out silently in the shame of her husband's death, she preferred to choose eternal rest for herself.

The villagers came to offer their condolences. It was a formality, nothing more.

There were some who looked upon Lestea's lack of tears with furrowed brows. From others, she could hear whispers of "what a strong daughter," or something of the sort.

The reality was, there was nothing left in her heart to feel sadness anymore. Her brother, father, and now her mother, strung along by a doomed path. It's just that now, she was truly and entirely alone in the world.

This house is empty now. It's just me now, she thought.

No longer did she need a human heart. No longer did she want one.

Love, kindness, she simply pared it off and threw it away, as if scraps of food.

She let the hate that dwelled in her heart grew sharper, more refined, until it truly was a crystal, cold to the touch.

Lestea left her hometown, searching for better lands with more people. And it was there she found a place much more wealthy than Morea was, with plenty of opportunity for good work and pay. Moreover, many travellers gathered there from far beyond, with plenty of intel in tow.

Lestea started working harder than ever before, much more than when she lived in Morea. It was a sketchy bar, where prostitutes often came and went, soliciting their business to potential customers.

Doesn't it get boring washing all those dishes? Why not come over here instead?

There were plenty of lechers who made those kinds of advances on Lestea. She was something of a looker—her face and figure could make her look a few years older than she really was.

Another time, then.

Lestea turned them down gently, so as not to provoke them. As annoyingly persistent as anyone was, she would always turn them down.

A killjoy of a girl, aren't you?

But even as they sneered at her, Lestea's true reasonings were different.

It had nothing to do with chastity. Far from it, in fact—if it was for money, Lestea would've gladly used her body and soul until nothing was left.

The reason the girl did not sell her body was but a single one. For the Crest on the right side her chest would have been bared for anyone to see.

As Lestea worked steadfastly, saving up what money she had, all kinds of rumours fell upon her ears. A bar where travellers and mercenaries frequented was a perfect place to pick up on things like these, after all.

From what she had heard, that young boy from Solta by the name of Darius, had left his hometown and moved to Seclue after everything that had happened.

No one knew what happened afterwards, but in time, there came rumours of him having training in swordsmanship, and of joining the Solta army.

Finally, finally, Lestea could feel it. It was time to put her plans into action. She started searching for mercenaries. If her plan was going to work, it had to be a strong one.

Among the most-talked-about mercenaries was someone by the name of Saris. He had just recently arrived, hailing from a foreign land.

He was stoic and unsociable, but his strength was terrifyingly great. Yet, he was also said to move extremely efficiently in battle, every single one of his movements thought out.

Aligned with neither Solta nor Morea, it appeared that he simply went where he was paid more. With that, Lestea took interest in him.

The bar where Saris typically stayed was in a village to the north, near the opening of a mountainous mine.

Lestea had prepared everything, but when she reached the area, even she flinched for a moment.

As far as the eye could see, there was not a single person who seemed decent. These were the rough back alleys of this town, for sure. The stench of blood and alcohol filled the air, while men with menacing glares roamed the outskirts.

The underground bar that Saris stayed in was in the innermost part of the area. Just looking at its exterior made Lestea's workplace seem like a high-class watering hole in comparison.

Lestea mustered up her strength as she walked down the musty smelling stairs, and swung the door open.

The smell of alcohol and some questionable tobacco greeted her. The sound of foreign music reverberated in the air as women with bare chests danced, swinging from side to side.

Lestea could hear a few sneers from a nearby group, having taken notice of her. From the faint darkness, several hands seemed to be calling to her, but she shook them off.

The mercenary with the raven-black hair was at the innermost table, sitting on a rather cramped chair and sipping on strong liquor.

As Lestea walked closer, he took notice, staring through the long fringes of his hair.

And as Lestea noticed his gaze, she shivered.

Saris's eyes were coldly sharp. Even through all that strong liquor, his eyes were dead-on and sober.

It's the first time I've ever seen anyone with eyes like that.

Lestea thought, in all her years of life, that this was someone on a completely other level.

Someone whose eyes looked like they'd made it through hell and lived to tell the tale.

Lestea requested something from Saris. To kill someone for her.

To kill a man from the Solta army. A man by the name of Darius.

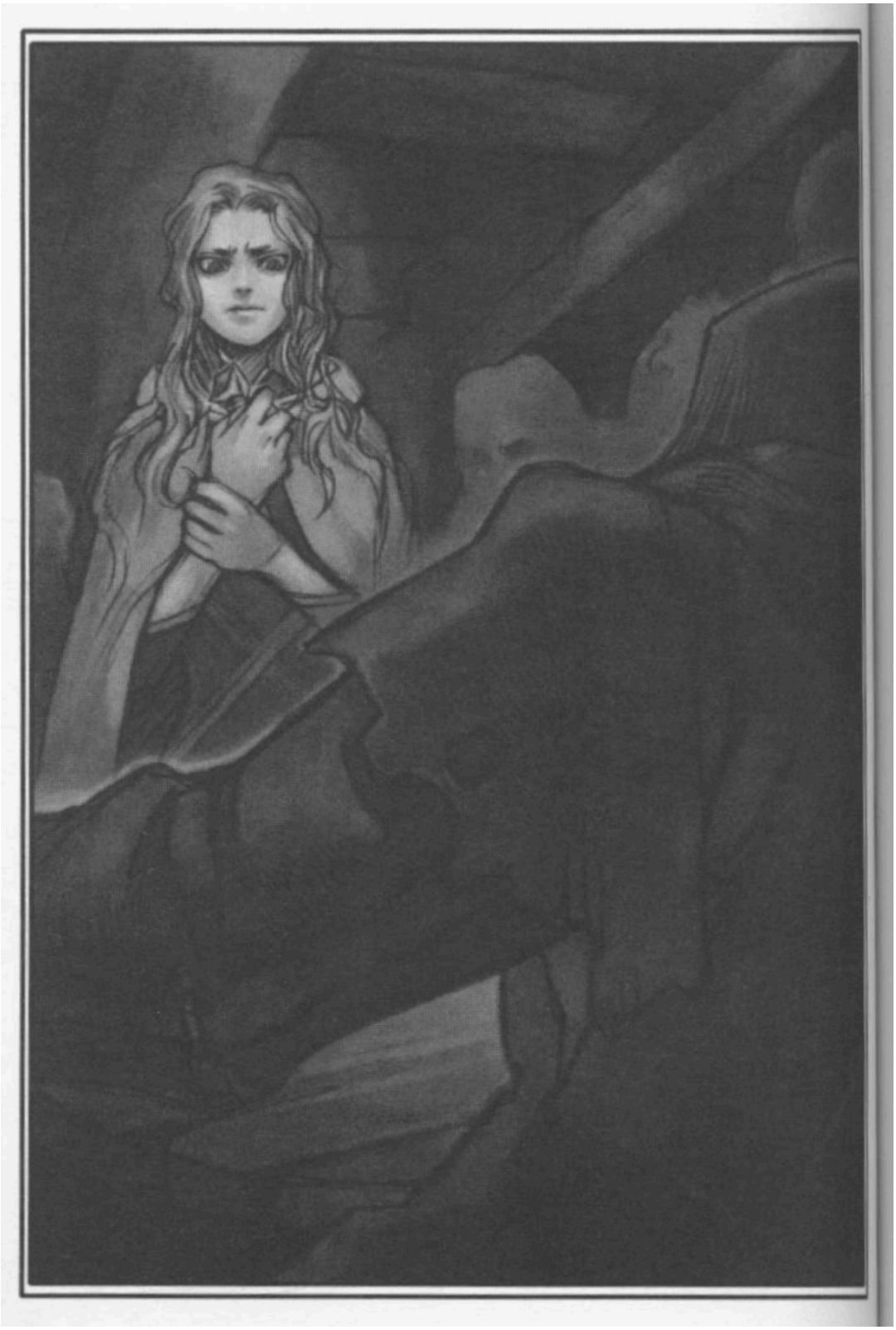
Saris was confused at first, but then his face slowly turned into one of interest.

This was her chance. Lestea brought out a leather pouch.

I will offer you this much. Is this enough for Darius?

The mercenary looked a bit irritated as he extended his hand out and grasped the pouch. All at once, he began to laugh, dangling the pouch in his one hand.

The men in the bar, who had been watching this turn of events quite closely, also burst out in laughter together with him.



Why don't you come back another time, missy? I'm not that cheap, you know—pocket money's not going to do it.

The sounds of laughter were becoming an uproar now.

Lestea was frozen. In the embarrassment, in the frustration, her head was completely blank.

She practically snatched the pouch out of Saris's hands and ran back out the way she came.

The last thing ringing in her ears were the crude drunkards, whistling and clapping as she ran out of the bar.

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She couldn't sleep that night.

In the end, the revenge she had sworn to take, it was just a little game to them, wasn't it?

That to a mercenary, one who had travelled through countless battlefields, she was just a "little missy" with a request not even worth batting an eye at?

All that money, all that blood and sweat, all those years, and absolutely nothing out of it.

The plan she had poured every last of her thoughts into had become meaningless, just like that.

Lestea cried out. Just what had she spent the last years of her life for?

It was like she had been knocked down into a frozen state of despair.

But, as day broke, as Lestea's tears finally came to an end, she had made her decision.

There was no need for mercenaries.

And if she didn't need anyone anymore, there was only one person who could do it.

There was only one person who *should* do it.

She would kill Darius with her own two hands.

She'd join the army to fight against Solta.

And with good timing—the situation between the two villages was constantly changing. Solta was part of the huge central governing body of Fontraile, and they were warming up to the idea of cutting down the Billiana Forest.

And even to the very end, Morea was the only village that opposed this decision, making them the outsiders within Fontraile.

It wouldn't be strange for small skirmishes here and there to one day explode into an all-out war. What else would explain the influx of warriors like Saris arriving on this continent, looking to make good money off of the wars of others?

Lestea began to study in swordsmanship. Although, with the body of a woman... At first, she wanted to quit, but she had the passion to keep it up.

At the same time, she started to research the Lost Empire of Rieubane. She recalled the fairy tales she had heard as a kid, and scoured old documents trying to find even a grain of truth behind them.

Deciphering the old text was difficult, and the lack of formal documents often frustrated Lestea to no end, but she was determined to see it out.

She relied on no one. There wasn't a single person to support her. She and she alone would cut open the path ahead of her.

It was those thoughts that kept Lestea going.

The Rieubane Empire. The Billiana Forest. Palmira. And the Crest. Her library of knowledge grew slowly as she continued to make progress.

And then, it dawned on her. The stories contained in that children's picture book were not simply just fairy tales after all.

The Rieubane Empire used to run a laboratory that specialised in "Human Research." By processing the Billiana fruit into the crystalline structure known as Palmira, weapons could be made from it, and from there it would react with the Crest, dramatically raising a person's strength into terrifying new heights.

It was a laboratory to be feared. As she looked into it more and more, Lestea became absorbed in this now-lost Human Research Lab.

If I could only just get ahold of those secrets.

If I could bring that lost knowledge back to life again.

She'd have nothing to fear anymore. Not Darius, nor the Solta army.

She might even be able to seal off his Crest's powers with that knowledge.

As she studied more and more into the old documents, she also spent time researching the tactics of war.

No matter how much she improved her strength, she would never be able to catch up to those men, and so her only choice was to fight with knowledge.

From ancient strategies, to books on how to fight, she delved into them all, while gathering intel on the Solta army at the same time. Forgoing sleep, she prepared everything she could for the upcoming war.

Soon, the day where her work bore fruit came. Lestea's enlistment was accepted, and she joined the Morea army.

Of course at first, she didn't particularly make any allies within the army. To see a woman wanting to become a soldier, she was met with strange eyes and ridicule.

Lestea didn't mind, and as she continued to give expert battle advice, more attention was brought to her.

"The Frigid Generaless." [4]

Someone had given her that nickname, and it stuck.

And of course, this was because no one had ever seen her smile since joining the army.

Not a single friend, and certainly not any lover, the woman who was always alone and always engrossed in her studies of human secrets.

And finally, the war had begun to intensify. At the same time, Darius's name was being thrown around within the barracks.

His superb swordsmanship, as they said, was thoroughly beating down the Morea army. Like his strength came from being possessed by some violent deity, was what they said. He didn't even need to rely on the Crest—his sword skill alone was enough of a demonstration.

Along with Felkin, "The Hope of Solta," and Ruyan, "The Warrior of Seclue," Darius and them made up a group called the Four Swordsmen. Within those four was also the mercenary that Lestea once requested. When she heard Saris's name once more, even Lestea smirked at the irony of fate.

With the way the war was going, Morea was at a disadvantage. The more they were caught up in the Solta army's onslaught, the more they suffered losses. With each passing day, the stench of defeat grew stronger and stronger.

Lestea's small group of troops had a task to do.

Her knowledge was accurate and her commanding skills sharp. Even as the main Morean troops suffered loss after loss, it was her small group alone that claimed victory after victory.

Even so, there was no way that this amount of effort would change the entire war situation. It was clear that it was only a matter of time until Morea would be swallowed up in the waves of history.

Lestea didn't care.

To her, the most important thing was not the victory of Morea, nor the protection of the forest.

It was revenge.

The person who had killed her father.

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[4] 笑わぬ女将軍, lit. "The unsmiling female general"

The one who had sent her mother spiralling into ruin.

And of course, the boy who bore the same Crest as she did.

The hate she harboured for Darius was scorching.

And it was that scorching fire alone, lit under her feet, that kept Lestea going.

Chapter 5

Darius and the others were astounded when the news reached them. He, alongside Felk and Saris, were currently in Seclue. To be more exact, they were at Ruyan's family home.

The Solta army, still in chase after the remnants of the Morea army, ultimately decided to proceed with Ruyan's proposition and restarted the logging of the Billiana Forest. Once they caught wind of this, Lestea's group would have to come out of hiding one way or another.

In order to make that happen, Ruyan stayed on site at the Billiana Forest, directing the soldiers. The now-Three Swordsmen stayed back, gathering any rumours they could about the remaining Morean soldiers, and arrived in Seclue—a testimony had come that there was potentially a group of Morean soldiers just nearby the village.

Still, hints were hard to come by, and they were slowly getting more and more frustrated. Any info they could get was valuable, but this one particular report was simply strange. A report they got from the Seclue library.

There appeared to be a young woman who'd frequent the library from morning till night. Her literature of choice was solely on the Rieubane Empire, searching book by book on the topic. From just a glance, she wasn't a familiar face around the area, but she didn't seem to have the face of a traveller, either. From how old she looked, she just might've been the girl that the Solta army had been searching for.

"Lestea? In hiding? And why'd she show up in a library of all places?"

Felk tilted his head.

They were sitting in the courtyard of Ruyan's house, a map of Seclue laid out, as they formulated a detailed and extensive search plan.

"And she's reading 'bout the Rieubane Empire? How's that gonna help her? If our troops really did see her, she shouldn't be all relaxed in these circumstances. They must've gotten the wrong person."

Felk grumbled, and looked back down to the map. He continued marking off the places they had searched, and the places that seemed suspicious.

"Rieubane, huh... That's interesting..."

Darius whispered to himself.

"What is?"

"That a young woman would be interested in those kinds of books."

"That so?"

Felk had no interest whatsoever in reading books, from which books were popular, and with who.

"The Seclue library... If it's their collection on the Rieubane Empire, I'm sure I've passed by it who knows how many times now."

"Hm, speaking of, you grew up in Seclue, didn't you?"

Darius nodded at Saris's question, and continued.

"That library has nearly every research book on Rieubane collected there. Anyone who's interested in the legends of the Lost Empire would absolutely know about it."

"And so what? Look, think with me for a second, Lestea's in the middle of evading capture from us, right now. Just how much do you think she likes old fairy tales that she's been spotted hanging out in a freakin' library?

"...Ohh, I get it now."

Saris, completely ignoring Felk's statement, looked over to Darius.

"Human Research."

"Yeah. She must've thought that her last resort to save Morea was to somehow resurrect those Palmira Armaments."

"It's an interesting idea."

Saris smiled.

Felk, in return, finally lost it.

"Oy, you two goddamn buddy-buddies! Stop talking about things that only you two get! I need to know too, explain it now!"

"Alright, what do you know about human research?"

Felk replied with a clear-cut "nothing" to Saris's question.

"How much have you heard about the thing called Palmira?"

"None."

"How about the Lost Empire of Rieubane?"

"Ain't it a fairy tale?"

Saris just shrugged his shoulders, hands open to the sky as he let out a "good grief." And once again, Felk's anger flared up.

"Oy, don't make a fool out of me! Rieubane Empire this, library that, it's all just useless crap! If there's a reason she'd be seen in a library, just spit it out already!"

Saris and Darius looked at each other. It was a staring contest, and whoever lost would be doing the explaining to this baby in an adult's clothes.

In their battle of silence, Darius lost in the end. He turned to face Felk.

"The Lost Empire of Rieubane used to have a branch of science into human secrets. To put it simply, they focused on experiments to see how they could harness the power of the Billiana Forest. They took Billiana fruit and extracted Palmira out of it. And by making weapons out of that, they could give people superhuman kinds of strength."

"How stupid. What is this, some sort of fairy tale?"

"Well, now, most people would think that. But, there are still a small number of scholars who take human research seriously. Serious enough to try and resurrect it in our modern time. And all those research books are gathered in the Seclue library."

"So...?"

"Lestea's really got her eyes set on human research, hasn't she? If she managed to bring back those Palmira Armaments in this day and time, I can only imagine how she'd fare against the Solta army..."

"So, that's it?"

Felk leaned back in his chair and snickered.

"That Lestea's acting up because she's been cornered, eh? No, I take it back. I can't see her with her head up in fairy-tale land. That bitch is the farthest thing from a pure-hearted dream walking maiden. Was she really, seriously in the library?"

"It's not just young maidens with dreams behind their eyes."

Saris spoke, his words drifting to the sky.

"It's a warrior dreaming a warrior's dream."

"The hell is that?"

"...Well, it's words from a poet from somewhere or another."

"Don't get all poetic like that. You're souring the mood."

"The study of human secrets is more than what you think. It isn't a nonsense fairy tale."

Darius spoke.

"Of course, there's plenty of legends about Rieubane that are ultimately false. But there *are* things out there that prove that the study of human secrets was real. That's what the researchers nowadays claim."

"Hmm..."

"For instance, the one thing that basically all of human secrets revolves around, the cursed mark—or in other words, humans marked with the Crest, they're still among us here and now."

"Are you for real? I know all about the Crest too, you know. Prolly since I was a little brat. But that one's a myth too. I've laid my eyes on who knows how many thousand people by now, and not once have I ever seen any weird looking mark on anyone, never—"

Ever, as Felk was about to brag until before his eyes, Darius started to slowly remove the cloth wrapped around his right hand.

Darius turned his wrist around, exposing the back of his right hand. There it was, clear as day. Like an eye, or a star, a mark in the most mysterious of shapes.

Felk was transfixed on the back of Darius's right hand, as if possessed. A moment passed before he could even start to get any words out.

With a gulp and a swallow of spit, he inquired.

"....What's... That's a tattoo, right?"

"No. It's the Crest."

Darius started wrapping the cloth back around his hand with great care.

Felk was, once again, dumbfounded. Darius started to speak.

"I've had this mark from the day I was born. So did my father. It's because of this that I was treated like garbage from all those Soltans. And they say that for those who are born with this, misfortune befalls them no matter where they go."

Darius smirked.

Felk had a look on his face of sheer disbelief. It was like all the bratty cynicism had drained from his body. The only thing that remained was an innocuous, timid little boy.

"But... That's just a birthmark, right? That's all it is? That pattern's just a coincidence, right? It's not like the Crest is anything special... Right?"

"You'd think so. And I can't say with absolute certainty. But I have my share of evidence backing up how the Crest brings misfortune. I'm sure you've heard how my family was killed by Moreans. And it wasn't just my family, but those assassins were killed as well. All under mysterious circumstances. No one knows who carried it out, but there's people out there, people who say it's all because of my Crest."

"Y-You..."

Felk's voice was shaking now. The confident, assured way he carried himself was no more.

"Y-you've never said anything about this before, haven't you? About this mark, not one word have you ever..."

"You've never asked about it, now, have you?"

"..."

Felk glanced over to Saris, who hardly had any interest in what was going on, and looked back to Darius.

"You two are kinda alike, you know that?"

"Really?"

"Is it true, though? Is it true that... That thing..."

Felk faltered before he asked.

"Has that Crest of yours... Really killed people?"

"I don't know. I don't remember anything from then. But regardless, the Crest is real. It exists now, just like it does in those legends. Which means, are you still going to claim that the research of human secrets is just a bunch of fraud? According to the Rieubane laboratories, the only people who could wield Palmira armaments are those with the Crest. So, if Lestea's thinking of trying to revive those kinds of things back, then..."

Darius cut off at those words.

He suddenly looked over to Saris, surprised. Saris was looking back at him with a stern gaze.

"...It couldn't be."

"Yeah. I was thinking something like that could be the case."

Darius's face stiffened, and he brought his left hand over his right, now covered in cloth.

Felk, once again in his agitation, slammed the table.

"You two are off in your own goddamn world again, aren't you?! WHAT case? Explain it to me, right now!"

"Well, for starters," Saris spoke.

"If Lestea's thinking about using the research of human secrets for her own purposes, there's a non-zero chance that she's thinking of wielding Palmira armaments, ain't there. Which is to say, just like Darius, she's got the Crest somewhere on her body."

"That's definitely a possibility."

Darius nodded.

"No, rather, it's the only conclusion I can come to. Saris, I know you've[5] met with Lestea before. Did she ever say anything like that at that time?"

"No."

Saris shook his head.

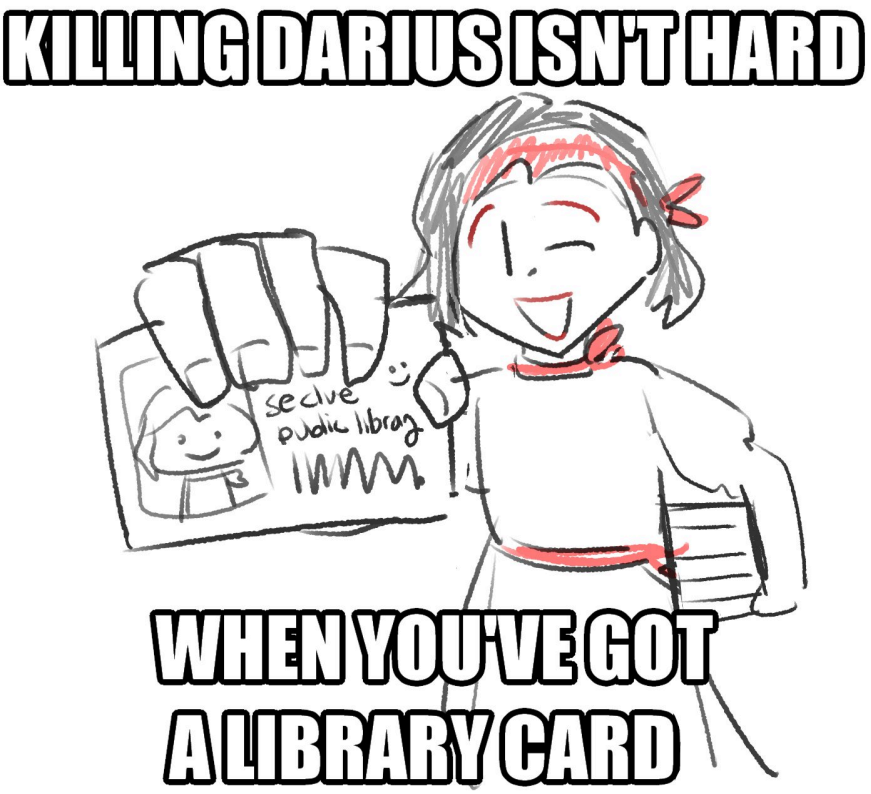
"All I've heard are rumours. The Frigid Generaless of Morea, she never allows herself to be seen bare. She's never had any lover, and not only that, but she's always stuck herself in that stiff-collared outfit even on the hottest days. It's like she doesn't want any man looking at her, which has garnered a few sneers."

"...We have to get to the library, now!"

Darius exclaimed, getting out of his chair.

Saris stood up too, almost as if kicking the chair out from beneath him. Just a beat behind, Felk followed them as well. Although, as usual, he had an expression on his face as if still processing everything that was going on.

[5] Darius used "kimi" (referring to someone of equal or lower status) for Saris here. My god.



If one were to look up, they'd notice that the room had been plunged into a deep purple—save for the single lamp, with only enough to illuminate the contents of the tabletop.

The Seclue Library had a long history, with a rich collection of research books about the Rieubane Empire. Knowing that, and despite knowing that her squadron was currently laying low, Lestea paid visits to the library regardless.

If she could revive the study of human secrets, they would surely win. She could kill Darius, smash the Solta army into pieces, and lead the Morea army to a huge reversal. Their victory.

To Lestea, this was her very last shred of hope. Her soldiers were gone. Her bases, gone. But if she could just uncover the secret behind Palmira.

The power that could multiply a human's strength. If she could just bring those secret methods back to life, it would be nothing short of a miracle.

Lestea once again dove into another book, looking for ways to formulate a plan, but soon enough, that book swallowed her up instead. She dove in so deep that she had quickly forgotten her original goal.

The memories of her childhood and sitting on her father's knee reading those picture books were fresh again in her mind. Of course, the books in her hands now were picture books no longer, and they had nary an illustration nor figures in them, but Lestea could feel it come

alive in her mind. Chalk-white palaces, rows of straight and narrow trees, storefronts bursting with vegetables of all kinds... The legends of Rieubane were still as vibrant as ever within the pages of those books.

As she continued reading through the books in a dreamy haze, the morning kept on going. Yet, in the end, she had only scanned through several or so books.

Is it almost closing time by now?

How many days will it take me to get through every last book?

Do I even have time? How long can I keep doing this until I get caught?

What if... I never get caught?

Lestea didn't know. These books, so full of importance, had been here all this time only to gather dust. What a loss it was.

If those scholars hadn't discarded the history of Rieubane as a fairy tale.

If they had banded together to research this elusive empire.

If they had put real effort into the study of human secrets, then they would be in a much less ignorant place than they were today.

They might even be able to change the foolish minds of those who thought to clear cut the Billiana Forest.

People who thought first and foremost of the immediate gains to be made.

People who would be losing the true value of the forest if they were to chop it all down.

To do it by herself would be impossible. But, if she could find people willing to work with her.

All the books here, all of their authors, if she could ask them one by one, to try and consult with them on if resurrecting the study of human secrets was possible.

Scholars who continued on their studies like that were few and scattered now, though. But surely, she would be able to find common allies to stand with her.

There must be some out there who oppose the logging of the Billiana Forest that the Solta army was commandeering. Those who sided with Morea and were willing to support their ideas.

She must be able to find people like that. It couldn't be impossible.

She could feel it. She could see that single ray of bright light before her.

A narrow, narrow, ray of light that could go out any moment. But even so, that light was much more preferable to the darkness.

Lestea stood up. She went to return the book to its original shelf, but it was already dark.

Yet again, the room had been enveloped in a darkness, deep enough to the point where she couldn't even make out the letters on the books' spines.

"Excuse me, sir. Would it be possible for you to light a lamp? It's become this late again, and I've got to get going back."

She raised her voice over to where the librarian should be sitting.

An orange light was lit with a whoosh. The librarian, who was usually in his small backroom, appeared with a candle held up alight.

"Have you finished your business here?"

"No, it's just not possible for me to read everything here. There's always another book to read..."

"If that's the case, why not take a few books home with you?"

"Is that alright?"

"Books on the research of Rieubane just aren't popular, I'm afraid. As there aren't many people grabbing at the chance to read these books, I'd say you're free to take as many as you'd like."

Lestea thought for a moment.

The more she visited the library, the more danger she'd be in.

If she borrowed books, however, that danger could be minimised somewhat.

"Then, I'll go borrow a few books. Thank you."

Though I'm not sure if I'll ever return them back, she thought.

Lestea took around 4 or 5 books that seemed to be of best interest to her, and carried them out on her arms.

"Take care on your way back home."

The voice of the librarian standing at the door of the library sent her off. Somehow, Lestea felt herself take his words to heart.

And just then, a strange sound reverberated from somewhere.

Like the sound of an exhale. Like someone suddenly holding back a laugh.

Lestea's nerves all came back to her.

Her skin prickled with fear. She could sense that danger was coming.

Did the librarian scheme against her? Did he, perhaps, know who she really was?

No. She was thinking into it too much. Lestea pressed down the fear rising in her chest.

Surely, it must've just been the remaining patrons of the library, reluctantly grumbling as they got up from their seats about to take their leave. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary.

It wasn't good to allow herself to be all high-strung. If she kept acting suspicious, then naturally, suspicion would be thrown on her.

Lestea continued walking out the large doors that the librarian had opened for her, and descended one by one down the steps.

At the last step, her footsteps stopped.

The wind had stopped. The air was somewhat still.

It was quite strange. There was no one outside.

This was practically the centre of Seclue. It was filled with plenty of restaurants and stores, and around this time, it should've been bustling with people.

Even the greenery swayed with a strangeness to them.

Lestea spun around and sprang back the way she came.

Running back up the stairs, she slipped back into the library, just as the doors were about to close.

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Darius had deployed soldiers to take the perimeter around the library, leaving civilians to evacuate the area.

The only people left in the library were the librarian and Lestea. It would only be a little time before night fell. The plan was, once Lestea came out of hiding, she would be captured right then and there.

“You guys were right.”

Felk, once again, had a face as if he couldn’t swallow the truth quite yet.

“If we really did get the right person, then this is downright hilarious. The entire Solta army sent into a frenzy, all because of one single pure little girl who loves fairy tales...”

“Just shut up.”

Darius chided, curtly.

Seclue’s library was the most prominent building in the area. The two-storey building, carved out of beautiful greyish stone, had rows of columns lining the perimeter of the building, and a characteristic rooftop with delicately sloped rows.

Of course, the library’s beautiful construction wasn’t the only thing it had going for it. Encased within were abundant collections of books, enough to faraway scholars and students alike pay a visit to the library.

Even the library’s opulent main door was adorned with a carving of an owl, meant to preside over wisdom. The path leading to the door was made up of seven high steps of stairs.

Darius and the others lay in ambush in nearby shrubbery, waiting for Lestea to appear.

But Lestea would not come out so easily. As they continued to monitor the unchanging situation, Felk grumbled once more.

"Why don't we stop wasting time waiting here and just bust in already? We go in, we verify that that's really Lestea, and if it is, we can..."

"Just be quiet."

Felk quieted up, but not without a sullen pout on his face.

Although, Darius had the same desire as Felk. But, at the same time, they'd all had their fair share of bitter experiences at the hands of Lestea.

How could they be so sure that this wasn't another trap this time?

If she was only feigning carelessness, then there'd be no guessing what trap would await them the moment they'd enter the library.

Their wariness had dulled their sense of action, no doubt. But no one wanted to lose any more soldiers needlessly.

And not only that, but the librarian was still within. Having a hostage in the library made movement harder for them. For now, waiting for Lestea to come out was the best plan they had at the moment.

"Darius."

It was Saris who was calling to him.

Aside from the childish Felk, it looked like Saris was starting to get bored, as well.

Darius glared at him, but the mercenary's stare was transfixed on the library's doors.

"As I said before. When I first met you, I was reminded of how much you resembled Lestea."

"...Yeah."

"It's in the way you both hold so much contempt for another. Lestea with Solta, and you with Morea and the grudge you have over how they killed your family. The way you've both decided within yourselves to keep fighting to the bitter end until either one of you falls. It's just so similar."

"..."

"But, that's not all that's similar about you."

Saris turned his eyes over to Darius.

"That woman's most likely bearing the same mark as you do. Cursed to be burdened with terrible fate, that same sense of resignation about you—that is, you both bring gloom and doom wherever you go."

"You can stop there."

Darius blurted in aggravation.

It was rare for someone like Saris, who never appeared to have an interest in others, to start talking like that. It was for that reason that his glare, pointed squarely at Darius, was piercing enough to hurt. For his heart to be read so clearly as that didn't make him feel good.

Up until now, Darius had never known any other person aside from him and his father who bore the Crest. All because it was a mark seldom seen, it was bestowed such a frightening nickname—the "cursed mark."

And of all things, Lestea was aiming for his life with such desperation.

And moreover, the daughter of the man he had slaughtered on that nightmarish day.

If she really had the same mark on him. How painfully ironic their fates were to be.

A thought came over Darius for a moment. He wanted to meet Lestea.

Not to speak with her, nor to connect, nothing as shallow as that.

Those who bore the Crest were much more fitted to fighting than to sympathy. To blades more than words. He wanted to fight with her. And not on just some battlefield where they'd never truly seen each others' faces. A one-on-one battle. That desire suddenly took hold in Darius's heart.

Anger at their pitiful fates, hate at everyone and anyone in the world, the misery of losing their family—thousands of words would be a waste, when a violent clashing of sparks from their swords could much better ascertain their murky feelings.

"She's here."

Felk whispered, tension in his voice.

The door of the library slowly opened. Darius tightened the grip on his sword.

Out from the door came a woman.

She couldn't have been more than some tens of steps away.

Hidden in the foliage, he could see her clearly.

It was the first time he could see her at this distance.

The colour of her eyes. The shape of her eyebrows.

The books she carried in her arms that surely must've been heavy. And surely, books on the history of Rieubane.

Black hair, trimmed short. It was nothing like the blazing red hair he'd seen on the battlefields.

But there was absolutely no doubt in his mind. Even if she had the spitting image of a docile village girl, from her head to her toes, was the spirit of a soldier emanating from her.

If it was a normal situation, such a girl would've passed him by. But to Darius, his eyes having witnessed countless skirmishes on the battlefield, he saw clear as day that she was draped in the same scent of a warrior as he was.

Darius's eyes narrowed.

Lestea was beautiful.

Though she was of smaller stature, she had a sense of strength running through her body. Despite the poverty she had lived through, not an ounce of exhaustion showed on her face.

There was no one else she could be. Unmistakably, absolutely, she was the Lestea of Morea.

He could feel Felk shuddering slightly, still crouched down at his side.

Not yet. Just a little closer.

It was time to send the signal.

Lestea stopped in her tracks.

Just as she was about to step down the last set of stairs, she suddenly stopped and stood where she was.

As if a little animal trying to get a sense for the wind, Lestea listened ever so carefully, ears alert.

Were we spotted?

Darius took a firm grip on his sword.

In that moment, Lestea turned around, as if a jump. It was as sudden as a fish darting away the moment a stone was cast its way.

Lestea swiftly made her way back up the stairs, and slipped back into the library just as the doors closed.

Felk shot up, a moment too late.

"Damn it! She spotted us!"

"She can't get away."

Saris said, in a tone that assured nothing would go wrong.

"We've got every exit surrounded. She can't run away any further. We're the owls now. She's the mouse.

"Let's go!"

Darius rushed his way into the library.

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Lestea felt pangs of fear of the kind she'd never felt before.

There was no one around to help her. It was just her, and her opponents had her surrounded. She had never found herself in such a difficult situation before, never on the battlefield or anywhere else.

There was only one person who caught notice of Lestea's sudden return inside the library—the librarian, with his mouth still agape. The glow of his candlestick illuminated him from the bottom, giving his shadowy appearance tinged that of a monster.

He must've thought that he could be at ease, with the end of his duties for the day safely finished. He looked utterly dumbfounded in his shock.

In his shock, the librarian swung his candlelight up, as if trying to hit Lestea.

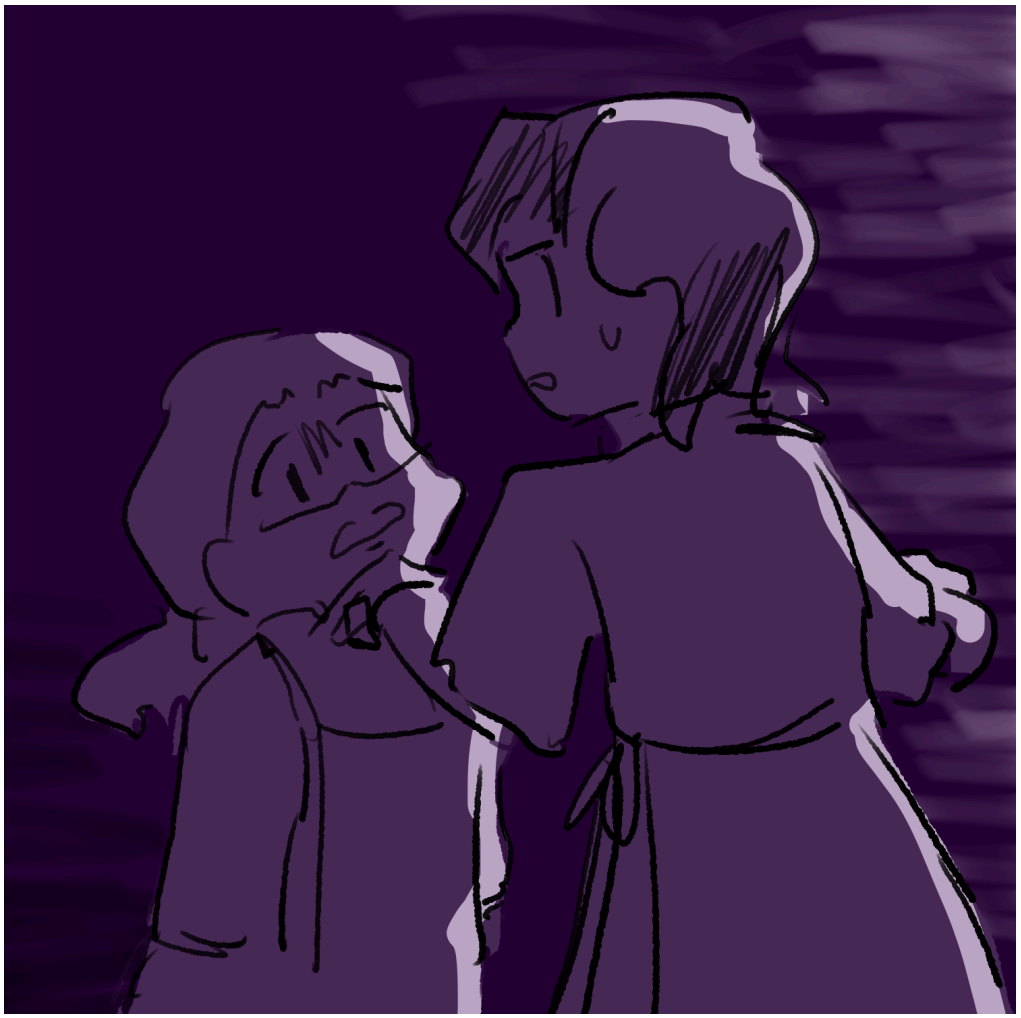
Lestea evaded the swing with a twist of her body, and tossed the books she was holding at the librarian.

The librarian shrieked into the air. More than throwing books at him, Lestea was aiming for him to drop the candlestick, for the candlelight to act as a catalyst.

And in an instant, the fire spread to the books. Lestea shuddered, but more than her, was of course the passionate, book-protecting reaction of the librarian. In a panic, he put himself on top of the books, smothering the fire.

In that moment, Lestea slipped past him, but quickly spun around on her heels.

She grabbed the librarian by his collar and dragged him across the ground. The librarian, imagining his final moments, shrieked with a sound that could split cracks in the wall.



Lestea readied her resolve. Trapped in the library, surrounded by foes, there was certainly no chance of victory here. But, at the very least, if she wanted to return one blow, then a hostage was necessary.

“Get over here!”

She shouted, violence in her voice, dragging the librarian along. The librarian was resistant in his steps, but a strike, strong enough to break off a tooth, was enough to make him give in.

Lestea had a single shred of guilt for exerting her strength over someone who wasn’t even a soldier, much less a person reaching his older years. But, at this point, she hadn’t the time to care.

“Where are the exits?”

“....Huh...?”

“How many exits are there?! Answer me!”

"There.... There's two... The front entrance, and a back one for staff.."

As she pulled the librarian along, Lestea darted through the rows of bookshelves, continuing to head further inside.

At that moment, she heard sounds of violent thrashing from behind her. Lestea clicked her tongue.

The back exit was out of the question. Now, she scanned around to find something to use as a weapon. But, of course, a library wouldn't have any swords or axes within. It wasn't nearly enough to give her peace of mind, but she grabbed the candlestick that the librarian dropped on the ground earlier, just in case. Traversing the reading rooms, she made her way further into the library.

The inner library was split into a dizzying array of chambers. History, literature, science, all these particular sections and more were categorized in their respective areas. It was as if the whole building was made of smaller, overlapping extensions, the bizarre passages through each area were like tentacles, extending out and tangling together.

No matter which area she found herself in, the bookshelves got in her way and cut her off, as if the library had become a labyrinth in of itself. Not only that, but there was no way to light the lamps that had been provided for the patrons of the library. The steadily approaching darkness made it so that there was no other way to traverse than by touch, but sooner than later, she'd lose her direction.

There was only one thing Lestea had at her advantage. She already had a rough estimate of the library's map in her head. And, as long as she had the librarian with her, she wouldn't be entirely lost. On the other hand, the inexperienced Solta army was large in number, and just as large in their disorder and confusion.

Even so, no matter how long this game of owl-and-mouse kept up, the two places she could escape from hadn't changed. From the entrance, or the back exit—as long as she couldn't get past either door, the only thing that awaited her was death.

The sound of footsteps rumbled in chaos both near and far. Within the labyrinth, shrouded by darkness, the only thing that was clear was the swirl of shouts.

Lestea was able to find a hiding spot. At the very least, a spot where she wouldn't be trapped in. Just a corner where she didn't have to watch her back, but a spot where she could still escape from if needed.

"How do you get up to the second floor?"

Lestea asked the librarian, in a secluded voice.

The librarian trembled and panted for breath, not answering her question. It was only after pointing the sharp trimmings of the candlestick at his neck that he finally spoke.

“The s-second floor is just more library books... There’s technical books, so... Patrons usually don’t go up there...”

“And stairs?”

“Just one stairway, inside the librarian’s backroom...”

Lestea quickly brought up the map of the library in her mind.

The librarian’s room was right next to the entrance of the library. And at this point of time, probably still filled to the brim with crowds of intruding Solta army soldiers. It would be dangerous to go in without a plan.

The intruding soldiers were confused right now. They were probably bumping into each others’ heads all over the place, eyes unaccustomed to the darkness. She could hear plenty of aggravated, foul words from where she was, too.

“Fire.”

“...Huh?”

“Where’s your fire starter?!”

The librarian brought out a set of matches from his breast pocket.

Lestea shut her eyes, and struck the candle alight.

There was commotion. The nearby soldiers must’ve noticed the sudden flash of light. But, it would still take a little time for one to make their way to the source of light, illuminating the twisting complications of the bookshelves.

As Lestea kept her eyes shut, she handed the candlestick off to the librarian, and raised her voice to the ceiling.

“To the heroes of Solta, I greatly apologize for putting all of you through this. But just what are you gentlemen looking for, at this late an hour?”

Lestea's voice echoed down from the tall ceiling of the library, reverberating throughout the building. All at once, the Soltan soldiers quieted down.

Lestea struck the librarian aside. There was a sound of him collapsing onto the floor. Another of his pitiful cries of help.

Stillness for a moment. Lestea concentrated her senses.

The reason she had kept her eyes shut the whole time was so the flame wouldn't spoil her eyesight. Once she was ready, she slowly opened her eyes.

Her eyesight began to adjust to the darkness. Within the shadows, she could faintly make out the outline of the bookshelves.

The sudden light was meant to cause more chaos than disciplined silence. From the way the air flowed, she could sense how the soldiers were moving around.

The way the soldiers were moving together at once made her anxious. If they moved around in a group, then Lestea's presence would be detected in a snap.

The only thing between her and a group of passing soldiers was a single bookshelf. Lestea held her breath as she listened to the tired panting of the soldiers.

There was another group of soldiers coming from behind, too. She hid herself under the shadows of the bookshelf as they passed her by. Successfully deceiving them, Lestea ran over to the bookshelves' gaps.

"Got her yet?"

"No, not over here!"

"Where is she!?"

"Where's the light?"

"Over here!"

The voices overlapped and rang out everywhere. From the sound of their footsteps, there had to be about 30-40 soldiers coming into the library.

Lestea stooped down low, and like a mouse, nimbly weaved her way through rows of bookshelves.

Avoiding the Soltan soldiers, little by little, she made her way closer to the entrance. Whenever the loud stomping noises of the soldiers' thick soled boots came closer, Lestea would slip to the other side.

Slowly, but surely, Lestea made her way to the back of the librarian's desk.

She slipped into the stairway. Somehow, she had made it this far without being caught. Lestea finally let out a sigh.

She made her way up the narrow stairs. The stairs were made of antiquated wood. She hastily made her way up the stairs, careful not to make any noise.

It sounded like the soldiers had found the librarian below. There were brash voices inquiring about Lestea's whereabouts.

In one breath, Lestea made it up the last few steps of stairs.

The second floor was many times messier than the ground floor. The bookshelves themselves seemed to be climbing towards the ceiling. There was no way anyone other than the library's head would know how they were organized. The scent of old books filled the air.

There had to be a window here. She had seen it from the outside of the building once, and thought it would be good to remember it was there. Just in case.

Can I really escape from here? And how can I?

Though Lestea was uneasy, the first floor was completely out of the question at this point—either she escaped from the second floor, or died trying.

Lestea made her way further into the stacks of books.

She had no time to falter. If the librarian told the soldiers about the stairway, they would soon come up the stairs and after her.

If her memory served her right, there was a window. Within the darkness was a thin, faint sliver of light, rectangular in shape. From beyond the window, it seemed like the moon had already risen in the sky.

Lestea breathed a sigh of relief. Though she didn't know how to descend from the building just yet, escape was nearly in her hands. Rushing over to the window, she practically lunged at its handles.

At that moment, something fell in front of her very eyes.

No, to be more precise, something was lowered. And very quickly, at that. Fast enough that it looked simply like a small, shadowy blur to her.

Lestea froze up.

Before she had even realized it, there was a large man standing next to her.

The thing that had swung down was a sword. Swung down with great ease, at that.

He, and the sword, were close enough to nearly graze Lestea's nose.

She didn't even notice him there. At least a head taller than an average man, yet somehow he was able to blend into the darkness without so much of a trace.

A pair of sober eyes looked down at Lestea. His stiff-looking, black hair reflected against the glow of the moonlight streaming through the window.

Lestea had known this man's name. Even before she had plunged herself into the army... As her body was scorching with hate, back from a time when she was utterly powerless, she had met this man, just once.

"Saris..."

Her voice was hoarse. Her fingertips numb. She could feel the blood coursing through her.

"Remembered my name, I see?"

The mercenary laughed. It was the same laugh he gave back when he tossed Lestea's pouch back to her, "little miss" ringing in her ears, making a fool out of her. Exactly the same.

"Why..."

She just needed one more step. The taste of freedom was right there. All divided by a pane of glass.

Lestea's voice quivered with bitterness.

"Why are you here? Your comrades are downstairs, still searching all over the place... Did you... Did you know I was going to come up here?"

"Of course not. I'm just playing hooky, is all."

Saris raised his sword back up, answering as if telling a joke.

"Someone of my type isn't fit to clamour around in the dark amidst all that chaos. So I took my leave while no one was looking, taking a break up here."

Saris hardly looked like he was telling the truth, but in the way he always spoke as if restraining a laugh, it didn't feel like he was entirely lying, either.

A mercenary like Saris was clearly skilled, yet at other times, it felt like he was very far from normal.

"It looks like your playing hooky's going to earn you quite a distinguishment in service."

Lestea spoke, resigned to her fate.

This was it. The conclusion of her life. She had no more tricks up her sleeve to stop Saris with. More than that, Lestea thought of how deserving this fate was for her.

After I die, how will Morea fare?

Her subordinates, still fleeing, would be picked off one by one, she thought.

With no more will left to fight, they would scatter far and wide, she thought.

No more home. No more family. The Moreans would be wandering endlessly, she thought.

If Morea were to no longer resist, what would happen to the Billiana Forest, she thought.

Those trees, cut and fallen, to be burnt and lost forever, she thought.

And once the forest was gone, what would the world be headed to, she wondered.

Would this world walk towards the same fate of that Lost Empire, she thought...

"Distinguishment in what?"

Saris inquired.

This wasn't the time or mood to poke at her words. Lestea snapped back.

"Don't play dumb. Just restrain me already. I'm sure your employer'll be praising you generously for being such a splendid bloodhound."

"I said it before, did I not? I'm skipping out, and that includes work."

Saris spoke with an amused tone, balancing his sword on his shoulder.

Lestea's eyebrows furrowed. She couldn't comprehend Saris's intentions.

"Go."

Saris gestured his chin over to the window.

Lestea's eyes widened.

"...What did you say?"

"Didn't you hear what I said?"

"You're going to let me escape?"

"What, you wanna get caught?"

Lestea quickly shook her head, still flustered.

Saris laughed, for he found her actions quite funny.

"Why'd you do this? Why'd you let me go?"

"I said what I said. I'm enjoying my truancy. I have no intention to lift even a finger to work."

Lestea touched the window.

She felt like she was half awake, half dreaming still. She had no idea why he'd let her go free like this.

Perhaps, he was giving her a last sense of hope, and when she had her back turned, he'd slash at her with that huge sword of his. There was a non-zero chance. But, such an underhanded trick wasn't like the mercenary. It wasn't like Lestea knew Saris's personality well, but for some reason, she was confident in her belief.

With one hand, she opened the window. Fresh air rushed into the library.

As she set foot outside the window, she turned around one last time. Saris was standing there, still with his large sword on his shoulder.

"I won't be saying thank you, then."

Lestea spoke, her harsh tone returning to her. Saris shrugged.

"Not very polite, are you?"

"There'll be a next time. And it will be on the battlefield."

"You still think you can fight back?"

Saris's concerned question was laced with cynicism. Lestea, offended, puffed her chest out.

"Of course."

And with that final exclamation, she slipped outside.

There was a narrow awning outside the window. First placing her feet on the awning, she carefully put her whole body through the window.

Her ankle-length skirt was extremely bothersome. Lestea thought, if she'd been wearing men's clothes as she usually did, it would've been much easier to move around.

She took great care not to let the moonlight shine down on her, becoming one with the shadows.

Lestea looked down for a second, and her whole body shivered.

There were about 10 soldiers left outside of the library. They must've been keeping watch in case Lestea were to escape through the front door.

Luckily, none of the soldiers turned their eyes up. They were diligently concentrated on guarding the door in front of them.

Lestea slowly walked along the awnings, turning the corner to the side of the building.

There was only soil on the ground below her, with just a bit of grass beginning to sprout.

Hopefully, that was enough to soften the blow.

Even so, to jump down from the height of the second floor still required courage. Lestea whispered a small prayer to herself.

And with her resolve steeled, she threw herself off the building.

In the moment her body flew through the air, she could feel herself freeze up from terror. She unfroze in the next moment, her limbs flailing through the air. And before she knew it, she'd hit the ground with a roll.

The impact was far more than she'd readied herself for. Though her head was uninjured, everything else below her torso took a great hit.

Lestea grasped at the still-sprouting grass, forcing her body to get up.

Saris's words came to mind once more. That peculiar, insulting, sneering voice of his.

You still think you can fight back.

Lestea clenched her teeth.

"Of course."

She repeated those short words over and over, and stood back up.

It didn't feel like she'd broken anything. Somehow, she could still move.

Lestea walked on, still in pain, limping on her left leg.

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"We need light! Make some damn light already!"

Angry cries could be heard. Cries coming from Felk.

Of course, they needed light, but more than that, Felk sounded more hysterical, more shrill than usual.

Maybe he's afraid of the dark?

Darius surmised.

At the moment, the only light glowing in the library was that of the candlestick that the librarian held on to. Darius kneeled down in front of the librarian, ready to question him.

"How do we get light further in the library?"

"Ah..."

The librarian's face was scrunched up. It was understandable—just not long before, he was at the mercy of Lestea's threats.

After swallowing down his spit several times, he was finally able to answer.

"E-each room in the library is fitted with lamps."

"How many are there in total?"

"Um... Around fifty..."

Darius let out a sigh.

"We need them all lit up, please."

"It'll take a while..."

"That doesn't matter."

For without any lights, they couldn't move around in the darkness. Both exits of the library were secured, so there was no chance that she could escape the building. The only thing they could do right now was light each lamp at a time, searching excruciatingly for her.

"E-erm..."

The librarian spoke up, but without much confidence to his words.

"What is it?"

"That woman, just beforehand... She might've been... The stairway..."

"What?"

The librarian was so frazzled that he could hardly get to the point.

"The stairs... Check the stairs... To make sure... She didn't go to the second floor..."

"What did you say?"

Darius was nearly on the verge of shaking the librarian by the neck.

“There’s an escape route on the second floor!?”

“No, no. But, there’s a window. Getting out from there is impossible, I’d think, but…”

Darius got up with enough abruptness to nearly knock the librarian out.

To Lestea, that was hardly impossible. If it came to it, that woman would even jump through the sky to escape from the library.

“We need to secure…”

The stairs, he was about to shout, until he was interrupted by a certain someone.

“There’s no one upstairs.”

A voice came.

It was Saris. From the darkness, his large frame suddenly came into view. The librarian’s narrow candlelight could just faintly make his appearance out.

Darius looked up to face him.

“How do you know that?” He questioned.

“I just came from patrolling up there.”

Darius squinted. He was sure he’d commanded Saris to search the right side of the library immediately past the front entrance.

“So you left your post. Breaking orders.”

“Hey, sorry. The stairs caught my attention and all.”

This wasn’t the time to argue. Darius asked once more.

“So, you looked around the entire second floor?”

“Yes. And Lestea wasn’t there.”

"And you patrolled the entire floor by yourself? It's hard to believe you wouldn't have missed any spots."

"I suppose so."

Saris responded, with a less-than-accepting tone.

"Of course there's a chance I might have missed something. But what I didn't see, I would've obviously heard. And I didn't hear nothing."

"...Look, putting that aside,"

Darius continued, losing his patience.

"We need to search the second floor again. We'll be lighting each room one by one down here, and searching each room before closing it off. We absolutely cannot let any details get past us."

"Oh, sounds good."

As Saris said that, though, he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd been made a fool out of. For perhaps the first time in his life, he understood what it was like to be Felk, with his selfish tunnel-visioned way of thinking.

"So, Saris. Since you're aware of where the stairs are, and I assume the general layout of the second floor, I need you to go up there one more time. And take 10 or so men with you. I'll be looking around the first floor."

"Understood."

With that, Saris disappeared back into the darkness.

And as if to replace him, Felk appeared.

"Felk, help me out here. We need to light each lamp one by one, and then from the beginning of the library, we need to close off the..."

As he spoke, however, Darius noticed a peculiar look on Felk's face.

There was a strangeness to his shadowed, downcast eyes. A sobering face as if he'd crossed paths with something terrifying, but at the same time, a sense of terrifying, inebriating excitement of his own.

Darius felt a wave of unease wash over him. This wasn't the happy-go-lucky Felk he'd always known. Was it perhaps the dim light of the candlestick, casting strange shadows on Felk, that it also made shadows cast over his mind?

"...Light it."

Felk murmured in a low tone.

It was difficult to make out. Darius uttered an "eh?" in return.

"We need fire. We need light. What better than to burn this all up?!"

As Felk shouted, he lunged towards the librarian, snatching the candlestick from his hand.

Then, Felk pulled out a book from a bookshelf—taking the candlestick, he lit it on fire and tossed it to the ground.

The book, leather-bound as it was, did not burn up as Felk expected, and simply smouldered out on the ground with puffs of smoke.

Felk, perhaps in rage at his own ineptitude, grabbed whatever next book he could get his hands on, and set that one alight as well.

Darius was shocked speechless.

"Felk, knock it off!"

Though he tried to restrain him, Felk was able to throw the burning book to the ground.

"I thought you needed light, didn't you?!"

Felk shot back, in a loud and irritated voice.

"Well, I'll give you light right now! I'll give you plenty!"

The book's flames began to spread. With a lick of orange-coloured fire, the bookshelf nearest to it caught flame. The spines began to scorch.

"Ah..... Ahh....."

The librarian could only let out pained groans. He frantically tried to put out the fire, only to be forced away by Felk.

"...Felk..."

Darius mumbled, still in a daze.

The other soldiers gathered in droves. They did not look upon Felk's actions with confusion nor pity. Rather, they knew exactly how to help their commander.

It was as if a fire lit up in their eyes, too.

Waves of indiscernible shouts came from the crowd. They grabbed the burning books and began to spread the flames even further.

"Hey, stop! Stop!"

Darius's commands had no strength to reach anyone's ears.

The heat of the spreading flames would not die down. Darius could smell the piercing scent of burning paper very well.

"Oh, man..."

Darius spun around at the sound of a voice from behind.

At that point, the fiery brightness of the flames was enough to see his surroundings clearly.

As if surrounded in a ring of flame, Saris was standing behind him.

"Just look at this mess, eh."

"It was Felk."

"I bet he got fed up with the whole situation, didn't he."

Saris spoke, with a sneer to his expression. Darius let out an exasperated sigh, resigning himself to the fate of the library's books.

"Just why did it turn out like this...?"

"Can't say I don't understand how he feels. I've got to say, being surrounded in complete dark with only books upon books to keep me company, my head's probably gone a bit off, too."

Saris shook his head.

Darius furrowed his brows. He didn't quite understand.

Yes, it was true that the bookshelves were a hindrance to the search, acting like a tangling labyrinth the further one descended in. It was aggravating.

Yet, still...

"Even so, I don't know if burning them up was the best idea. There's so many important historical records kept here..."

"To a person like Felk, it's unbearable. Each and every book is filled with thousands of words, each of them silently asserting their own claims. In this library alone, those thousands upon thousands upon thousands of books all lined up together, without even a voice, are pushing down with great pressure on this place. Not to mention the darkness. Imagine being stared down, book upon book, the embodiment of wisdom and intelligence eyeing you down. Probably wouldn't feel too great, I take it."

"...I don't get it."

"Well, I suppose you wouldn't get it."

Saris looked upon the bookshelves, now having become a wall of flame.

"More importantly, we ought to be getting the troops to retreat by now. Don't wanna make any roasts out of soldiers, I'm sure."

"But, Lestea is still..."

"If we wait outside, she'll be smoked out of here soon enough."

The heat of the library was quickly becoming unbearable. What Saris said was right. The quicker they all got out of there, the better.

Darius restrained the librarian, who was frantically still in the middle of trying to put out the flames.

"I'm sorry about this."

He spoke, pulling the weary librarian away from the fire with ease.

"You should bring this case to Fontraile and file for damages. No, actually, file it on Felk's father instead. You should be able to get something for the loss of the books and the library..."

"You don't get it!"

The librarian snapped back, furious in his cries.

Darius felt a pit in his heart upon noticing the tears spilling down the librarian's eyes.

It was unbearable to handle a person like the librarian, whose entire life must've been given purpose by literature, as much as it was unbearable to deal with people like Felk, who knew nothing at all about the value of the books here.

"None of you, none of you understand anything at all! Money will never be able to bring back the damages you've brought on this library. You don't know how many significant books were gathered here, and now, we'll never know just how many...!"

"I'm sorry."

"Your apologies aren't going to fix anything! You've all burned down the very culture of Edinbury. Our history, our wisdom, our pride...!"

"Look, I get it already..."

As he dragged the librarian along, anger still frothing from his mouth, Darius somehow made his way to the front entrance. The soldiers also made their exit one by one from the fires within.

The librarian kept spouting words of hate, as if trying to curse them all.

"If I'd known this would happen, I'd have never made that report at all! Compared to you all, that woman from Morea was much, much more reasonable than you lot...!"

"What kind of books was Lestea reading?"

Reaching the outside of the library, Darius inquired.

The librarian shook again before answering.

"Books about the Rieubane Empire..."

"On human research?"

The librarian looked at Darius, surprised that he knew of such of a thing.

“Y-yes, that’s right.”

“Did she say anything regarding the books she read?”

“No, just…”

The fire had finally spread to the building as well. The beautiful white building was mercilessly going up in flames. The ringleader of the fire, Felk, was sitting upon the just-sprouting grass, legs spread out, looking upon the building as if it was another person’s problem now.

The librarian buried his face in his hands, letting out deep groans of despair, before continuing.

“She was so completely absorbed in the books to a point where not even shouting would wake her from her dreams. In all my years of working here, I’d never seen someone love books with so much passion. To an outsider, they would see a normal person reading a book, but I could tell that her very soul had escaped within its pages. It’s a feeling I know very well…”

Darius looked upon the library, alight with flame.

Lestea’s eyes, glittering with vigour, ravenously reading through each book, was a sight he could very clearly imagine in front of his eyes.

Because he himself had seen such a sight before. Perhaps 4 or 5 years ago, now.

Darius, too, was invited by the book-loving Ruyan to the library despite not having much interest in books himself.

Although Ruyan was more fond of literature, Darius found himself entirely drawn to history. And on top of that, he was interested in the legends of the Lost Empire of Rieubane, a topic hardly anyone took interest in nowadays.

With a thick book in hand, he read, forgetting quickly the time of day and how fast the hours went by.

The cursed mark imprinted on his right hand. Within the Rieubane Empire, there was a study dedicated to creating a man-made version of this mark with the power of technology. Upon learning this, Darius couldn’t help but want to know more and more.

Palmira. Crest. Human research. If the empire hadn't disappeared, if he could've taken over the development of that technology..... It was a terrifying fantasy, but also a strangely attractive appeal.

Saris did say that he and Lestea resembled each other. As frustrating as it was, he couldn't deny how likely that was. Despite not knowing anything about each other except for that they both bore that cursed mark, they shared a common viewpoint.

Lestea must've still been in the library. As the smoke and fire chased her down, there must've been nowhere else for her to escape to.

Darius clenched his fist.

This wasn't the conclusion he wanted.

It was true that Darius's goal was to bring the Morea army to ruins and finally defeat Lestea, but for her to meet her demise like this was something he couldn't stand for.

Come on. Come out of there.

Darius stared piercingly at the door, silently keeping those words in his heart.

And moreover, would someone as prideful as Lestea choose to die in the hellfire more than dying at the hands of the enemy?

Darius stared at the door. Alongside him, so did Felk, the librarian, the soldiers, they all watched it intently. Waiting for that woman to burst out from there. Only the soldiers lost interest, turning their gazes to the moon above instead.

Even as the sound of the library's crumbling structure reverberated through the air, the Lestea of Morea did not once appear before them.

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Avoiding the eye of the public, Lestea chose to walk through the alleyways.

The pain in her leg was getting worse the more time passed. She grit her teeth as she continued walking forward.

Seclue was, in comparison to Solta or Morea, was much more affluent, and in turn its public safety was much better. Though they were called alleys, they felt completely safe.

They were really more just rows of homes lining the streets, with soot-black walls to match. The only thing that really passed her by was the occasional cat or dog.

So for a moment, Lestea did not notice the fire coming from the library. If she had walked the main street, she surely would've been able to hear the clamouring from the crowds, without a doubt.

As she continued passing through parallel downtown Seclue, Lestea forced herself to walk upright.

I should be going back to the main road soon.

With how dark it was already getting around the alleys, no one would probably stop to notice her walking with a limp—but still, a sudden patrol would be a huge risk for her. With her eyes to the ground, trying to look normal, she continued walking.

Just then, Lestea noticed a peculiar commotion from afar.

In the opposite direction, crowds of people were bustling, quickly rushing past her in a clamour. No one noticed her, trudging along with a limping leg.

To Lestea, this was a situation she was happy about—but, the voices she heard as they ran past sent a chill up her spine.

"It was a fire!"

"Just how would a fire start there, of all places..."

"It was the Solta army who started it."

"Why'd they do such a stupid thing like that..."

A fire. The Solta army.

No. It couldn't be.

Lestea fearfully, slowly, turned around.

There was no library anymore. But the light that emanated from the ground and lit up the night sky was all she needed to know. It must have been the source of a huge fire.

Lestea was aghast.

The library had burned down? Did those precious collections of books go down with it?

If the Solta army had started the fire, there had to be only one goal they had in mind. They must've thought that Lestea was still within, and planned to use the smoke to drive her out.

They were idiots. Just fucking idiotic.

In that one moment, Lestea forgot even the pain from her leg. Only rage filled her heart.

Just how many thousands upon thousands of books had been turned to ash, all to search for one single woman? Were those goddamn Soltan soldiers out of their minds?

Their morals were clear-cut to her now. To burn down an entire library just to find their enemy, to raze the Billiana Forest just to increase the farmland. Their short-sighted decisions had zero understanding of the history that came before them. The history they were doomed to repeat. The future they refused to imagine. They were lower than animals.

If it was something she could do, she'd sprint right back to stop the fire. If at the very least, she could salvage the research books on the Rieubane Empire and mend it back to how it was before.

But, there was just absolutely no way she could do that. Lestea was simply another person caught up in the crowd, still in a daze as she looked up to the unnaturally bright night sky.

Soon, it came the time for Lestea to go. She turned around on her heel and began walking again, against the flow of the crowd.

With a furious rage in her heart. Fighting against unbearable pain.

Chapter 6

Darius and the others departed from Seclue, returning back to the Billiana Forest.

The preparation progress for wide-scale logging was going smoothly, thanks to Ruyan. As he listened to the events that had occurred over at Seclue, a complicated expression arose on his face.

"I see, now... So, I take it Lestea died in that fire?"

"Well, uhh..."

Felk's face was scrunched up as he replied.

"We weren't able to find any corpses."

"Huh?"

"After the fire finally went out, we searched through the rubble, but not a single corpse came up."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It means she got away. That bitch ran off."

Felk kicked up the ground, frustration in his words.

"But, if what you said before is true, didn't the three of you watch the library until it had burned down entirely?"

Ruyan exchanged glances with Darius and Felk in tandem, a puzzled look on his own face.

Darius nodded slowly. A nod with grimness to it.

"We did. We had troops around the entire perimeter."

"If that's so, then what gap would there be for her to escape from...?"

"There weren't any. There should've been none. But she still disappeared."

"Just how did she do it?"

"If I were to guess, she escaped from the second-floor window before the fire spread too far."

"The... Second floor?"

Ruyan was bewildered as Felk prepared one of his usual biting remarks.

"That bitch's like a witch. Probably flew right out the window and into the sky."

"And since then, no one has spotted her, not even once, I take it..."

"Yeah. There was a storehouse on the edge of Seclue that was currently abandoned. It seems like the lot of them turned it into a hideout. But once we figured it out, they were already gone with the wind."

"...So in other words, they've given up..."

Ruyan murmured, before turning to the others to restate himself.

"If they've stopped resisting against the Solta army, then it basically means they've surrendered. I'm sure they've scattered off faraway, escaping to places safer for them. And if that's the case, we shouldn't push ourselves to the brink just to pursue them any further than this."

"...That means you, Darius."

Ruyan looked upon his friend with hesitant eyes.

"I know how you feel, but, it's time to stop obsessing after Lestea. This war is over. We should be working towards a new Fontraile now, and..."

"You can. I won't. I haven't given up."

Darius interrupted his friend's words with biting words of his own.

"If every single person you cared for died, until you yourself were the only one left, you would never stop fighting. If she hates Solta with the same passion as I hate Morea, then she would never entertain the thought of giving up."

"Darius..."

"Lestea will come out."

Darius asserted.

"Heh," Felk snickered.

"You sound like you know how she feels. What're you, bosom buddies?"

He quipped, dripping with irony. Darius's expression did not change.

Ruyan nodded, his face still fraught with worry.

"Well, for the time being, let's continue with the logging for now. If it's true that she wouldn't give in like this, then I don't think she'll be able to stay put for much longer."

***

That evening, Ruyan invited Darius to visit the village of Morea together.

"Morea? You know no one's left there anymore."

Darius looked a bit suspicious. Ruyan nodded, replying to him.

"That's right. But even so, I want you to come along. To see for yourself what the abandoned village of Morea looks like."

"I'm not going. Logging the forest is much more important than..."

"We're just fine on that front for now. Just think of it as going out on a short walk, it won't take very long."

Darius made a deep frown, but with Ruyan's coercion, the two were on their way to Morea.

Morea had become a complete and utter ghost town. There were hardly any signs of anyone left—just the clusters of houses that remained.

The sound of creaking doors, swung open by the wind, beat down on them. The fields looked as if they were just freshly abandoned, agricultural tools tossed away on dirt ground.

Ruyan and Darius walked along the village's pathways, silent.

After a while, Ruyan spoke.

"Doesn't this place remind you of the village you grew up in?"

"...Yeah."

Darius replied, curt in his response, glaring upon each and every deserted house one at a time.

"Desolate, poor, and hopeless. It really does feel familiar. That's the fate for these villages, both cursed by the Billiana Forest."

"I'm sure it was a better place to live, a long time ago."

"Yeah, give or take a million years. It'd have to be much before I was even born. And when you're born in the village of Solta, you learn about our conflict with Morea even before you learn how to walk."

"It's truly unfortunate..."

Darius glared at Ruyan, displeasure flaring up for a moment.

Ruyan continued, his eyes facing forward.

"You know, Darius. I don't think it'll be too long before we have to start thinking about restoring Morea back to a liveable state. It doesn't matter what actions Lestea takes, this war is undoubtedly going to end soon. The question is what comes afterwards. Once people learn that the war is over, they'll likely return to this village. And when those who've been fleeing from the ravages of war come back, that's when the reconstruction of a new Morea will start, I'm sure. We should be thinking about how to help with that."

Darius did not respond, his eyes turned away.

Ruyan continued on walking as he spoke, each step precise in intention.

"I can understand how you feel. How you'll never let go of your revenge on Morea. But, Darius, think about it. You've already succeeded in that. From now on, could you think forward to your future, rather than letting yourself be consumed in revenge?"

"...And you brought me all the way out here just to talk about that."

"I sure did."

Ruyan nodded.

"I thought that if I brought you to see the sight of this village, you'd come to understand as well. We can't just leave this village as is in its desolate state. Fontraile needs you. If we work together with Felk and the others, I'm sure, we'll..."

Ruyan took a brief pause from talking to the profile of his friend's face to curiously ask a question.

"...What's the matter, Darius...?"

Darius stopped in his tracks. Just a beat later, Ruyan too, could hear the same sound.

It was the tiniest sound of rustling through dry sand. Yet nothing was tiny enough for them not to pick up on. The two exchanged glimpses for a moment, before both whirling around to see what lay behind them.

A slightly strong wind kicked up the sand into clouds. Beyond their evening shadows, stretching into the horizon, stood the figures of several people.

At the centre of it, one particularly shorter figure—a silhouette, nearly unmistakable for a child.

A woman, donning men's clothing right up to her stiff collar. Her hair, once called a fiery red, was now dyed black, cut short. Bangs cut short like a young boy. And the eyes that sparkled below them, full of energy and vigour.

The Lestea of Morea, and the elite soldiers she commanded, shimmered like heat haze upon the path of the abandoned village, looking down upon the two.

Ruyan took a step back, shaken in his composure. To stumble across the very enemy they were just talking about, in this place, of all places. It had never crossed his mind. Neither he nor Darius had weapons on them.

Darius was, however, completely at ease. As if he'd just stumbled across an old friend while out on a walk, his tone was completely in high spirits as he spoke.

"How'd you get here? I'm pretty sure we've got Solta soldiers positioned in every nook and cranny around the village."

"...I was born and raised in this village."

Lestea spoke, her voice loud and clear.

"I know plenty of shortcuts to and coming from Morea."

"Just how and where did you sneak up on us from? And how'd you know we were separated from the army in the first place..."

Lestea was silent.

The Morea soldiers slowly approached.

Ruyan stepped back, about to signal for Darius to turn back and retreat, but stopped dead in his tracks, stunned into shock. There were soldiers at their backs all of a sudden, too. All of them with weapons in hand.

"I see—so you're saying that Morea hasn't backed down, and that they never will?"

Darius called out.

And he continued, not waiting for an answer.

"Same goes for me."

And at that moment, he leapt to the side.

And so did Ruyan in the opposite direction.

Darius barged into the first building he could find. An old, traditional house, doors and windows wide open, that must've belonged to a poor family.

So the homes here were similar in structure, too. Dirt floors, with a few small bedrooms further in, and a flight of stairs leading to the second floor in the middle of the house.

Darius dashed through the dirt floors, making it to the kitchen, lying in wait.

The light that shone upon the floors was still bright, but the windowless rooms further in quickly grew in dimness. In that darkness, Darius pressed flat against the walls.

And soon did the rush of footsteps follow.

Listening to the footsteps hitting the floor, Darius wanted to laugh.

This was like an encore of the library. Concealing oneself in darkness, having to stifle one's breathing, with plenty of foes being directed every which way. It's just that now, the sides were completely turned around.

The first person stepped in. The moment his foot touched the ground, Darius dug his heels into the floor, leaping from his position. Any soldier would've been anticipating a surprise attack, but Darius's momentum was far greater than any preparation.

In a sudden daze, it was a simple task to knock him out with a fist to the torso. Darius plucked the sword from the unconscious soldier's hand.

More soldiers came barraging at Darius. Their stances were prepared, one more step ahead of Darius, lunging their swords at him in a flurry.

Pain struck his left shoulder. If he hadn't dodged it any faster, it could've pierced his chest.

Darius swung his sword with all the strength left in his body.

It landed, cleaving the Morean soldier's left arm off. Everything below the man's elbow fell to the dirt floor below.

Screams of pain flew through the air. With those screams came a spray of blood, enough to send the soldiers behind him flinching.

In one moment the soldiers stood there, dumbfounded, the next they were cut down.

Darius didn't hesitate. Nor did he feel a shred of fear. Two Morean soldiers down already.

The soldiers, though their numbers far greater, were swallowed up in the fear of one man. Surely in their minds, the image of Darius's war exploits, a creeping, brilliant stench of blood, was coming alive right before their eyes.

The Four Swordsmen wasn't a title just for show. To instil both fear and respect to the battle hardened, the veterans, the soldiers who'd seen thousands of battles, that was the reason behind the name.

Like swordsmanship on the level of a violent deity. The persistent fortitude that a soldier needed. The soldiers now, were witnessing before their eyes, the rare occurrence of a warrior with both. Before them was a legend in the making.

Darius continued to swing his sword with great force.

But his left side was open, shoulder still injured. One of the soldiers dove in, swinging his sword down with a rousing shout.

Darius was faster, cutting the man down first. Slicing his neck open, the soldier fell to the ground.

No technique to his sword. If this was a training session with their master, he would've scolded him endlessly by now.

Those who are careless are also full of openings.

But he was different from all the soldiers who simply relied on strength. What channelled into Darius's swordsmanship was a seemingly endless spirit to fight. His reflexes were far above the norm.

The Morean soldiers' will to fight was completely and utterly drained. They began to step back, ready to turn the other way.

Darius took the chance and broke through the soldiers' encirclement, dashing his way back outside the house.

Ruyan also burst out of a house just nearby.

Darius smirked. While he wasn't looking, Ruyan must've just finished up from a bout of fighting too, he surmised.

His swordsmanship truly did contrast Darius's. Delicate, magnificent, completely by the book.

Someone ignorant of Ruyan's skill would probably think it to be light work, dispatching such an innocent young man and his equally innocent swordwork. They'd poke fun and make light of his delicate countenance. But Ruyan's fanciful swordplay was a prelude to

something much more fearful. A waltz set against the mounds of corpses, now slowly growing.

Ruyan also had a sword, stolen from a soldier, in his hand. He looked at Darius, concern in his voice as he spoke.

“Did you get injured?”

“It’ll wash off.”

His words were laced with some unfounded pride. The gash on his left shoulder was more severe than he realised.

If that injury deepened, his left arm would be as good as gone. It would be impossible to keep his balance while withstanding the pain. And if he didn’t stop the bleeding, it wouldn’t be long before his stamina ran out. Not a situation he could afford.

Ruyan took position, standing back-to-back with Darius.

“Leave that injured side of yours to me. I’ll protect it.”

Ruyan whispered, without missing a beat.

Darius answered with an audible “hmph” through his nose. That was plenty enough to get his sentiments across.

The Morea soldiers gathered around the two men.

Positioned right in front of Darius was none other than Lestea. Even she had a sword in hand, now after all this time. She settled into a defensive stance, straight out of a textbook.

Darius glared at the woman. Lestea, too, completely scanned over Ruyan, and looked straight at Darius.

Darius could feel a shudder throughout his entire body. Not out of fear. But the delight he partook in finally standing against Lestea.

Darius raised his sword up once more, pointing it at her. He opened his mouth.

“I just have one thing I wanted to make sure of.”

The soldiers seemed to flinch in reaction. Lestea listened on, unwavering in her stance.

"Those Morean assassins. Your father was part of it, wasn't he?"

Lestea's eyes turned sharp.

Slowly, she opened her mouth, and answered.

"...That's right."

"And you have a grudge against me because of it? Because of the fact that I killed your father?"

"....."

Lestea bit her lip.

Darius scoffed.

"He sure knew how to pick his targets. Your father was a damn coward. Using me as a hostage, knowing I was powerless, in order to slaughter my parents in cold blood. Of course he deserved to die."

"Be quiet."

"I will absolutely never forget what happened. The day my father, my mother, and Sharline, who treated me like her own family, all of them. Slain by assassins. Slain by your father."

"Shut up."

"Hate me all you want. Because I despise you just as much. You, and every single Morean, every one of them. I've never wanted to stop fighting. Not until I eradicate every single last one of you."

The soldiers were taken aback. Such a torrent of words, saturated in their hate.

It wasn't just them, either. It was such an intense outburst of loathing. Even Ruyan, standing at his back, could feel a heavy pit in his heart.

Lestea bit down hard on her lips, glaring even harder at Darius than before. So they were both spurred on by the same kind of hatred. Her heart lit aflame.

"You're a goddamn monster."

Lestea spoke, her voice low.

Darius laughed.

"What, because of the Crest on my right hand? Well then, yes, I am a monster. A freak of nature who can't even control his own powers. But what does that make you, Lestea? Why risk everything to visit the Seclue library so many times? Why research the Rieubane Empire's study of human secrets? Why did you want to know so much about the Crest? About those Palmira Armaments?"

"....."

"Not going to answer? Then I'll say it for you. Because you're able to wield those Palmira Armaments. You and I are one and the same. Call me a monster all you want. But you're just like me. We're monsters with brands carved into our accursed bodies!"

The soldiers' eyes turned to Lestea all at once.

For a moment, they had all forgotten that they were in the thick of battle. Darius's words were enough to shake up the soldiers.

"You're wrong."

Lestea spoke, her words trembling with anger.

"I'm not like you."

"Yes. You are. Hide it with clothing or with cloth or whatever, neither of us can escape it. Those who bear the Crest will be cursed their whole life though."

"I'm not you. I'm not a monster!"

Lestea finally lunged in, her small body stooped forward.

Darius raised his sword, deflecting her blow with great strength.

Steel against steel. A shrill reverberated through the dust-filled air.

That was the cue. All at once, the Morea soldiers barraged in, swords pointed at the two.

Swords flying. The pain in his left shoulder all but forgotten. As if Darius was in a trance.

Ruyan, too, was slicing down soldiers as he covered for Darius's injured side. Switching between offence and defence as easy as breathing.

The enemies in front of him would get a sword plunged deep into the chests. Those to the right would get struck down. And to those who targeted Darius from the left, they too were quickly dispatched of.

It was no simple feat to fight while protecting another at the same time. Ruyan's skills were top notch.

Lestea came at Darius relentlessly. And when the blade was pointed back at her, she would leap away.

Her swordwork was excellent. Of course, when it came to physical strength and skill, she couldn't match those of Darius nor Ruyan's. But her swordsmanship was precise, daring.

The wind kicked up in intensity. The sand flung into the sky, and soon the soldiers were shrouded in it.

Darius could feel his breaths getting deeper. In a normal battle, such a thing wouldn't have happened, but the seeping blood from his shoulder was sapping his energy at an alarming rate.

Upon realising this, the Morean soldiers fought with renewed vigour.

And as hard as Ruyan fought, he couldn't keep covering for Darius forever. The encircling soldiers gradually closed in more and more on the two.

At that, one of the soldiers ran in, sword aimed at Darius.

Darius tried to step to the side to avoid the attack, but was suddenly thrown off guard.

The sand had gotten in his eyes. He lost balance for just a moment, but that was enough to send him to the ground, stamina lacking from blood loss, unable to get back up.

It only lasted a moment. But it was the moment Lestea needed.

With a shout, Lestea prepared to swing her sword down.

The sword was raised aloft in the air. The last remnants of sunlight reflecting against it. She could see the end. All it took was one strike to the skull. And then it would be over. She would kill Darius.

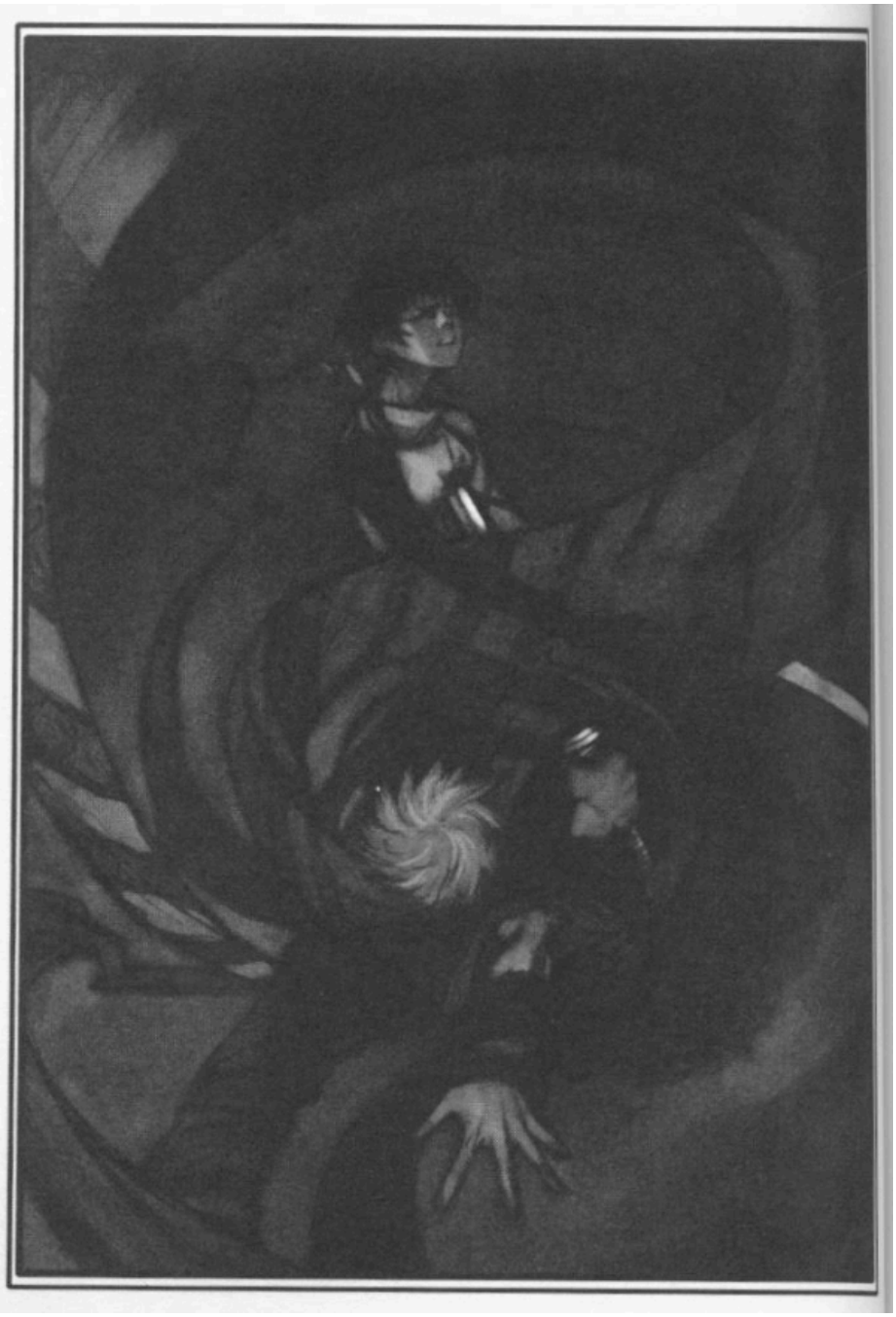
But Darius was not someone simple enough to be killed by a strike so easily.

Just before it landed, he pulled his body back, dodging Lestea's sword, and in his defenceless position, made one last lunge.

The horrible sound of steel cutting through flesh could be heard.

And for a moment, everything came to a standstill.

The Morea soldiers were dumbfounded, staring at the young girl, their commander, who had brought them all the way to this final battle.



Darius's sword pierced right through the left side of her chest.

Lestea's hands went slack, her body frozen, her eyes still transfixed on Darius with a fiery glare.

Darius, in reaction to her glare, drew his sword out of her chest, with staggered breaths.

Fresh blood spilled out. Lestea had a bewildered face, taking just one tottered step. Her sword had clattered to the ground.

And then, Lestea's small body crumpled.

At the same time, so did Darius fall to his knees. The adrenaline was finally wearing off.

Even the Morea soldiers seemed to shake out of it. Unrest came over the crowd, not knowing what to do next. To continue fighting, to scatter away in retreat, as they weighed their choices, no one could come to a resolution.

"...It's over."

The one who raised his voice was none other than Ruyan.

Supporting Darius to stand up, Ruyan looked out upon the crowd of soldiers. To the crowd, up until that moment, he was a soldier, a young man, with incredible swordwork to match. Now, he looked upon the soldiers with calm, quiet eyes.

"Let's end it, right here and now. Your commander has been defeated. There's no more reason to fight any longer."

The Morea soldiers were stunned.

Within their crowd, one man dropped his sword.

"Oy!"

An angry voice came from the crowd. Another voice, that of the soldier who dropped his sword, whispered.

"...That man is right. If we don't have our commander anymore, how can we keep going on like this?"

"But..."

"We need to get her medical attention, first of all."

The soldiers looked to Lestea.

She was collapsed, face against the ground. Fresh blood pooled from her back, staining her clothes a deep crimson. Even the ground below her was slowly growing in red.

It was clear to anyone that she was on death's door, her breath faint.

"...We need to carry her."

One of the Morea soldiers stepped forward, bringing his arms close to Lestea's body.

At that moment, Darius spoke.

"Wait."

The soldiers tensed up in surprise. They must've assumed that he wanted to go for a second round of fighting.

On the contrary, Darius continued on.

"I want to talk with her... I want to talk with Lestea. I just need a moment."

"Darius."

Ruyan was apprehensive.

"She's hardly conscious anymore. You're wounded, too. We need to get you treated first."

"Stay out of this."

Darius shook off Ruyan's arm and got up, his resolution set in his voice.

And as if in response to him, Lestea too, stirred up ever so slightly.

Slowly, she raised her head. And with her arms, she was able to weakly lift herself up.

Her soldiers looked as if they wanted to assist her, but Lestea gave a soundless rejection.

Slowly, painfully, she was able to get up on her knees. The way her arms weakly dangled was akin to a broken doll.

Her eyes, once glimmering with a spirit that would never back down from fighting, were dull.

"...I'm..."

As if the words were bunched up in her throat, she strained to even whisper them out.

"I'm not... A monster..."

Lestea reached for her sword, still lying on the ground.

Even the strength it took her to hold the sword looked like it might fall out of her hands at any moment.

Deeply, painstakingly slow, did it take her to lift the sword up with her two hands, her arms trembling as she positioned it against her own chest.

Those who looked, looked on while swallowing their breath. Would Lestea forgo a slow departure away from this world, and instead choose her own way to die, to plunge a sword into her own chest?

She chose neither.

Lestea carefully guided the sword, slicing open her own clothes.

From her collar, down to her men's clothing, everything from her neck down.

And then, her skin was bare.

Lestea had not a shred of embarrassment in her. Her skin was clear, supple. Exposing her naked body in front of the men, Lestea smirked with satisfaction.

Fresh blood continued to flow out of the fatal blow Darius had inflicted. But, everyone's eyes looked over the wound, completely focused on somewhere else.

On Lestea's left breast was a strange marking.

It was a mark—or rather, it would be more fitting to call it a brand, like the dragged remnants of a ghastly burn. It spread all over her breast, just reaching her shoulder.

Like a black flower that had taken root on her body. Her body was beautifully clear, save for the pitiful sight of that brand.

Ruyan could only whisper, half in shock.

"Lestea.... You.... That scar of yours..."

"Crest."

Lestea responded, weakly.

"It's the Crest. My Crest. The cursed mark. My father, when he was alive—he always, always told me to wear things with a stiff collar."

Lestea dropped her sword, closing her eyes.

"I wasn't to show it to anyone. Because it was the mark of a curse. I didn't understand what my father was telling me. It was only after that day, when I realized... How right he was."

Lestea, slowly, opened her eyes once more.

Though her eyes were dull, her stare at Darius was intense.

He stood very still, only looking at Lestea's burn-inflicted scar.

"The boy who killed my father was the same as me, with that same cursed mark. How that power exploded, killing my father and his group—just knowing that snapped something in me. The Crest. The thing that killed my father. The accursed mark. The very same one carved into my own chest."

Lestea's face tightened. Was it out of pain, or out of rage.

"I couldn't forgive him. The boy who killed my father. That goddamn monster who had the same mark as me. That's why... That's why, I..."

Her words trailed off, blurred and soundless. The last shine in her eyes was on the very verge of extinguishing. Her consciousness, becoming hazy and faint.

At the very end, her lips just quivering ever so slightly, whispered.

"I'm not... A monster."

Her final sentence.

Lestea, slowly, slumped over. The last moments of her strength, exhausted.

By the time the Morea soldiers rushed in to hold her up, she was already gone. Cloudy eyes, still glaring into the dusty sky.

***

Within the village of Morea, the sound of bells rang.

Through the uninhabited houses, the unattended fields, did the clear tone of the bells flow through.

The Solta army, after having confirmed Lestea's death, observed a temporary truce in order for the funeral ceremony to be carried out.

Three men from the Morea army had climbed up to the belfry of the church. They rang the bells, long out of commission, to send off Lestea's final journey.

There was no pastor. No relatives of the deceased. The ones who sent Lestea off were the Morea soldiers who fought alongside her to the very end, as well as some of the few Solta soldiers who rivalled her in battle countless times.

Ruyan and Saris were in attendance. Felk's unpleasant face was absent from the group. As for Darius's absence, he was still resting at camp, recovering from his injuries.

Due to a lack of manpower, the funeral procession was quite informal in the end. The deceased, draped in white, resting within a wooden crate refashioned into a casket, was to be buried in the cemetery.

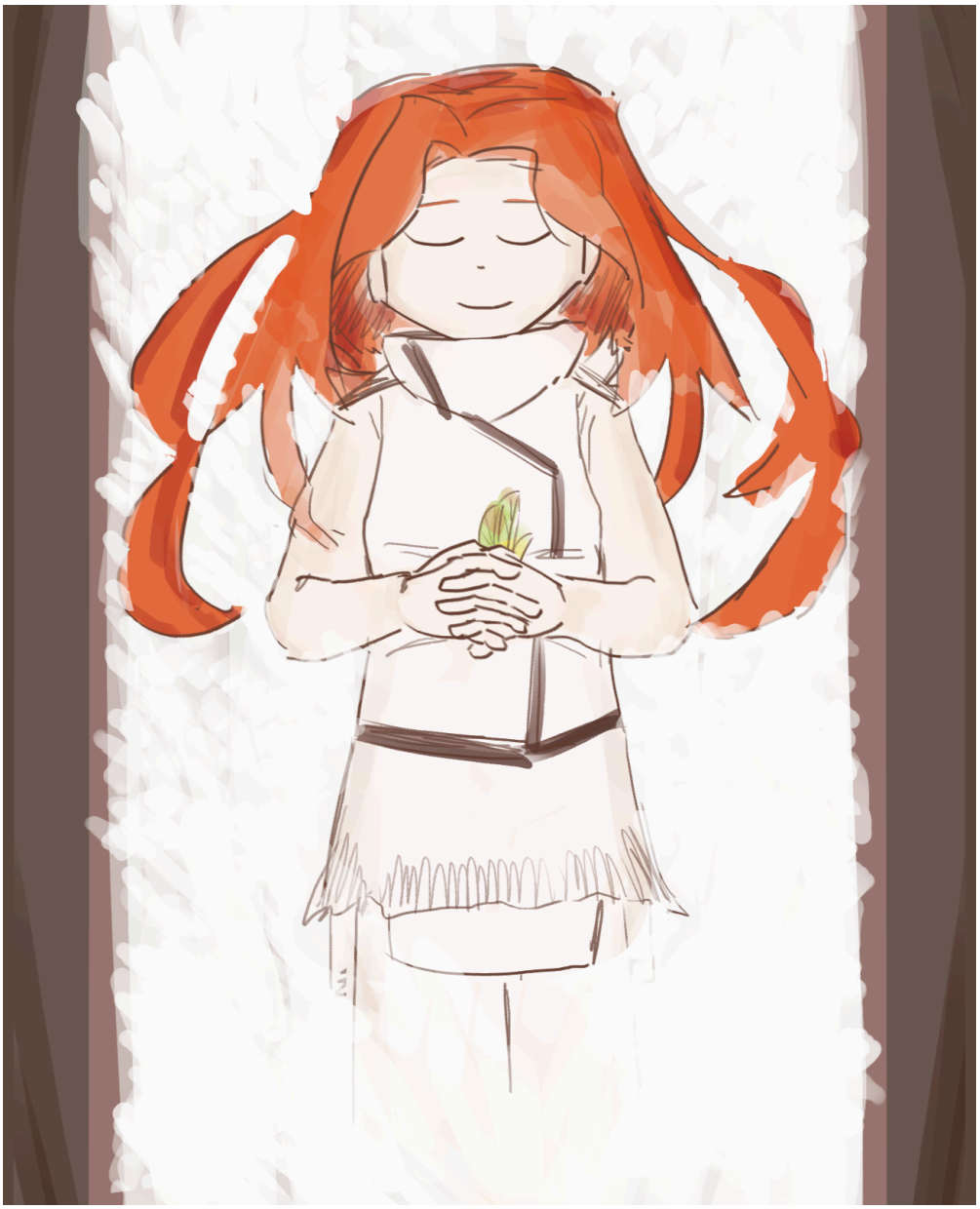
Her father slept within the cemetery, as well. And now, beside him, was his daughter buried. The Morea soldiers had dug the grave.

Just before the lid was placed atop the casket, Ruyan placed scattered flowers atop Lestea's body.

"How nice of you," did Saris interject, though no one laughed.

Lestea's face in death was unlike the ferocity she had in life. It was a gentle smile, one just like any other young woman would have, the blessed smile of one who had lived an ordinary life.

Of course, her white clothes did well to cover the wound on her chest. Her wounds, one scarred, one staunched, were practically unnoticeable if one were to simply look from the outside.



With the lid closed, the casket was lowered into the earth below.

Everyone present lowered their heads, whispering their last prayers.

The funeral ceremony ended, as short and modest as it was, just like the person it was for.

***

Ruyan and Saris made their way out of the village, walking side-by-side back to the tents where the Solta army was stationed.

Something had been bugging at Ruyan since before the funeral procession started. He looked up to the rugged mercenary beside him, trying to start a conversation.

“You surprised me a bit back there, Saris.”

"Why?"

"The fact that you would attend her funeral..."

Saris looked down to Ruyan, eyes narrowed in doubt.

Ruyan corrected himself.

"No, really, the fact that you'd attend any funeral at all would be surprising. I assumed that you wouldn't have any interest in those kinds of matters."

"Well, if you're talking about how we all live and die, I'll let you know that I'm not one for philosophical views."

"Hmm... That's not exactly what I'm trying to get at..."

Ruyan wasn't particularly good with Saris. In fact, thinking about it, that might have been the first time the two of them had a conversation together.

Saris was an outstanding warrior, with vast experience to match. Sure, he and Ruyan were on good terms, but to be brutally precise, they were two entirely different kinds of people that would never see eye-to-eye. They had fought on the same battlefields, seen the same precipices of life and death, but still, Ruyan could never understand how Saris was the person he was. At times, he thought he might've been able to come to some sort of tangible comprehension, but in the end, it was nothing more than a shot in the dark. It was probably impossible to ever wheedle any sort of concrete emotion Saris had within him.

"It's not just the funeral, but just any sort of formality, I had just assumed you had no interest in anything of those sorts. Still, it's appreciated that you came out to attend. Lestea was our enemy, but at the same time, the way she fought was worthy of respect... I think it was right for us to have been there, to send her off."

Saris puffed out a sigh, clearly implied to mean *what the hell is he on about*.

Ruyan just glanced over his way once more, awkwardly chuckling.

"...Although, regarding the matter about the mark on Lestea's chest."

"Huh?"

"I wonder, was that mark truly the Crest?"

"What?"

"Those with the Crest are destined to be cursed their whole life through. Precisely like how Billiana Forest has ruined the lives of so many people... It's something Darius has said many times in the past. If the Crest truly has enough power to control one's destiny, I just wonder... It's not something that simply goes away by burning it off yourself... Is it?"

"So then, you don't think she had the Crest after all?"

"That's what I think."

Ruyan answered, shaking his head, brushing away the sweeping bangs almost poking against his eyes.

"Normal people don't try to comprehend the real shape of the Crest. The only people who want to know are people like Darius. People with the mark themselves. I believe that what Lestea had on her body was nothing more than a mark. For the sake of her revenge—to hold hate for Darius within her for so long, she believed in that mark, for it to be the Crest, like it was the only thing she could hold onto, regardless whether or not it was the truth."

"...She could easily convince herself that the mark she had was the Crest until she believed it to be the truth. So that she could burn it off. How ironic.[6]"

Ruyan nodded.

"It's truly a shame. Perhaps, if she didn't have such a cruel fate to begin with, and was blessed with a peaceful life instead, she wouldn't have been so wrapped up in the knowledge of the Crest and of Palmira. She would never have had such a burn mark on her skin, either. In the end, she was chasing after the illusion of what the Crest might bring, all by her lonesome, and how—"

Ruyan cut off his words there, noticing how Saris was hardly listening at all anymore.

Saris kept his gaze to the ground, continuing to walk on in silence.

His face, calm as it always was, looked just a bit more down than usual. But, Ruyan would never be able to know what he was thinking.

After a little longer, the tent settlements came into view.

Their footsteps sped up just a little.

[6] This particular scene where they ruminate on Lestea's Crest is so confusing to me please help if you get it.

And Saris spoke.

“I suppose my time here’s just about up.”

“Hm?”

Ruyan looked up to Saris, surprised.

“The battle’s pretty much over. There’s not really much space for me here anymore.”

It was true. This was Saris; of course he’d prefer chopping ties to trees.

When wars end, so too would mercenaries make their leave, searching for new battles on a never ending journey.

Even Ruyan knew this, and it wasn’t like he wanted to stop Saris from going.

But, having earned the nickname of the famed Four Swordsmen alongside him, he couldn’t help but feel a twinge of loneliness at losing one of their own.

Ruyan spoke, sincerity in his words.

“So then, are you planning to leave us? I... We just need a bit more assistance, and it would be great to have you here just a little bit longer, Saris.”

“You need help? If it’s with logging, then sorry, but no thanks.”

“It’s not that. There’s still Morea soldiers left out here, ones who are still plenty resistant to surrender, and we need to approach those groups, and...”

Saris laughed, hard enough to make his shoulders shake.

“Lestea’s gone. I’m absolutely certain you can wipe out the remnants and make it home in time for breakfast. It’s just not my place to be.”

Ruyan couldn’t find anything more to say.

To be honest, Saris was right.

The days of fighting were soon coming to an end. Very soon would come a new era, the very thing Ruyan had always wished for.

People would work together to topple the Billiana Forest, building the path for a more prosperous Fontraile.

He should've been more excited for this outcome, but the clouds in Ruyan's heart did not go away. The painful days of fighting that seemed to go forever seemed like fond memories all of a sudden.

Ruyan nodded his head, as if shaking off the last remnants of regret he had.

"Well then, I suppose you're relieved of your duties."

"Yep."

"Take care. If I hear any whispers of your name around, I'll be wishing that you're doing well."

"Hold on now, are you sure you wanna say that so easily? Don't go forgetting that I'm a mercenary, and one who goes along with the highest bidder."

Saris gave Ruyan a warning, a little confounded in his words.

"You never know if the next time I see you might be as my foe. Make sure not to go easy on me, just because we know each other."

"...I know, it's true. As for me, I'll have to make sure to get strong enough so that I'll win against you."

Saris said nothing more, perhaps at surprise from Ruyan's sweetly-spoken provocation.

Ruyan laughed, his eyes turning away.

The Billiana Forest could be seen, leaves sprouting in full bloom.

How it sapped the land of nourishment, rendering the surrounding farmland around it to be dry and infertile—it should be a source of hate for Ruyan, but now, why was it that the lush greenery of the forest looked so pleasant? Even the green leaves, thick in their growth, seemed to foreshadow the future that Fontraile was going to usher in.

Ruyan departed from Saris, and walked towards the tent that Darius was resting in.

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The space within the tent was dim. To Ruyan's eyes, still adjusting from the sunlight outside, he couldn't quite make out the inner contents yet.

"Darius? How are you holding up?"

Ruyan asked, upon entering the tent. He figured that Darius was resting in bed, but after two, three steps in, he froze in shock.

Darius was not sleeping. At a desk prepared within the tent, he was there, sitting. His arms were resting on the table, his head lowered.

After examining the wound inflicted on his shoulder, he was advised to get ample bedrest.

It was more severe than they originally thought, so naturally, he should've been resting. So, then...

Ruyan blinked his eyes a few times, before calling out to him in concern.

"What are you doing over there? Darius, you're not supposed to be sitting up. You might catch a fever if you push yourself too hard. I'm sure you want to heal up sooner than later."

Darius raised his head.

Ruyan took a seat in front of him.

He peered into Darius's eyes. It was hard to make out his expression in the darkness of the tent. He couldn't help but feel a horrible pit in his stomach.

"....Darius...?"

Ruyan whispered, before his body tensed up with a jump.

Darius had suddenly raised his hand up. Grasped tightly in his hand, a short dagger. A dagger that he'd normally grasp with his dominant hand.

It was in his left.

He raised it just high enough to eye level, and for a moment, Darius was silent.

Ruyan could only watch his friend, fixated. The air was stifling, too stifling to even work up the courage to make a noise.

"...I've been thinking."

Darius spoke, his voice hoarse.

"Ever since I saw Lestea die with my own two eyes. I've been thinking. I've been thinking about how she and I weren't the same after all. If she could burn off her own Crest like that, then I should do it, too. I've loathed this Crest for so long. How much I've yearned to just escape from it. But I couldn't. I could only ignore its existence wrapped under layers of cloth."

Ruyan blinked several more times. Finally, his eyes started to get adjusted to the darkness.

He couldn't make out the expression on Darius's face because he had none. Sunken, hollow eyes were looking back at Ruyan.

No. His eyes may have been turned Ruyan's way, but Darius was looking somewhere else.

Somewhere far, far away. Somewhere not in this world.

"I should've done this a long time ago. So that I could escape this fate."

Darius slowly lowered the dagger.

With the edge of the blade, he sliced off the cloth wrapped around his right hand.

The cloth fell around his hand, the cursed mark now laying bare. Within the darkness of the tent, it seemed to be the only thing that was ever-so-slightly visible.

"...This mark that killed Sharline. I should've cut it off earlier. Much earlier."

Darius gently traced the lines of the mark with the edge of his blade. His left hand, grasping the dagger, was trembling.

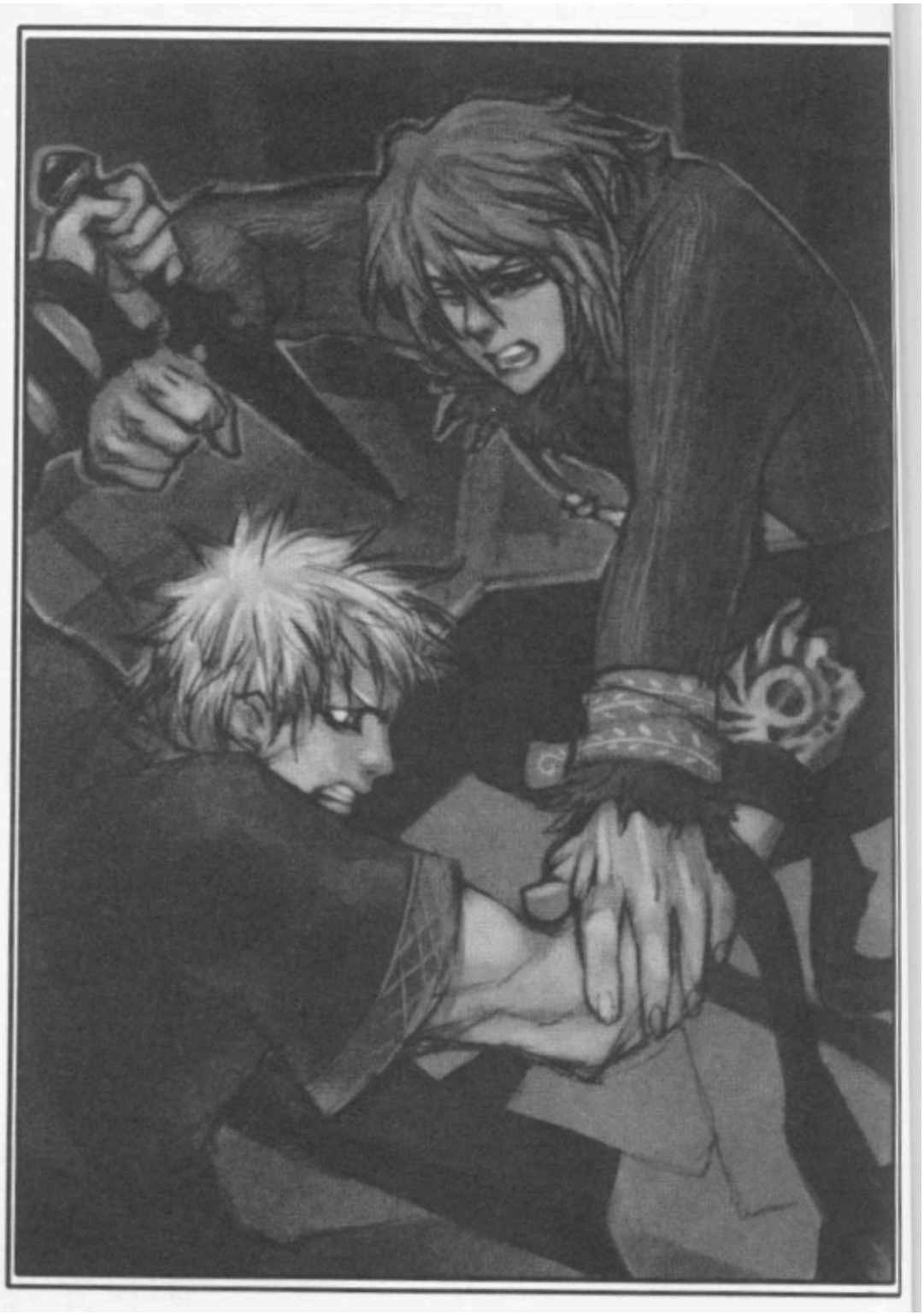
Suddenly, the blade stopped.

The grip tightened around the hilt of the blade.

Before thinking, Ruyan jumped up.

"Stop it, Darius!"

He reached his arm out, trying to snatch the dagger from his hands.



Darius would not let go, his hand tightly gripped. A struggle quickly ensued. Ruyan, undaunted, shoved into Darius's left shoulder.

A groan escaped Darius's mouth. He dropped the dagger from his hand, clutching over the table.

Ruyan grabbed the dagger, panting as he looked back to Darius.

Darius swung his head up, raising his voice in indignation.

"...You, what the hell did you do that for?!"

"You wouldn't let go of the dagger."

"I'm still injured! You'd kick a man while he's down?!"

"If you're injured, then get back in bed already."

With those scolding words, Darius turned his face away with an exhale out his nose.

Ruyan readied himself to speak to him.

Sometimes, this friend of his would act so very childish.

"If you want it back, then you need to stop doing such stupid things, please."

"Stupid?"

"Yes. Please don't injure your own body like that."

"It's just as Lestea did. Burning off her own Crest."

"Well..."

Maybe the mark on Lestea's body wasn't the Crest after all.

Ruyan wanted to say, but he swallowed the words back down.

Even if he suggested that, he figured that it wouldn't bring Darius any solace at all. If anything, the more "maybes" he threw out would only serve to muddy his heart more, throwing things into confusion.

Ruyan continued, deliberate in his wording.

"You and Lestea are different."

"...You're wrong."

Darius spoke, his hands on the desk, tightened.

"It's as Saris said. How Lestea and I resemble each other. So of course we'd hold the same things in our hearts. The same hate for each other. The same cursed fates. And the same Crest. We're like the same person. Like birds of a feather. To the extent that we'd hate each other."

"You are not her."

Ruyan pressed on, trying to get through to him.

"Lestea was alone. After losing her family, she kept fighting all by herself without even a single friend by her side. Aren't you different from that?"

"I'm not. I'm..."

"You are different. Because I'm here."

"..."

Darius had a surprised look on his face.

And Ruyan, upon seeing that, was reminded of the first time he had met Darius.

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... We've been entrusted in the care of my friend's son. He's a year older than you. Make sure to get along with him.

Ruyan was startled when his father suddenly brought up the news. But soon after that, he was happily buzzing with excitement.

Why Darius had to suddenly move away from his hometown, he wasn't told.

Nor did Ruyan care to know more about whatever dark and sad thing had happened.

To Ruyan, an only child, it was much more wonderful knowing that there was someone he could be good friends with, someone that could be like an older brother to him. Ruyan excitedly awaited the day that Darius would come home.

But, in reality, the Darius before him was terribly cold, quiet, with a hardened glare as if the entire world was his enemy.

When he tried to talk with Darius, he gave little to no reply. Even when he racked his brain with fun topics to talk about, nothing would catch on with him.

Ruyan was tenacious, and stuck close to Darius. He'd visit Darius's room over and over, approaching him with light-hearted topics all the while. If he got a reply, even just a simple one, that would be enough to make Ruyan happy the whole day through.

In time, in such gradual time, Darius seemed to open up to him little by little. For when he treated Ruyan's talkative habits as an annoyance, now could he go along with the flow of the conversation with ease.

Even so, there were times that Darius would have outbursts of rage. If Ruyan were to say just one thing that rubbed him the wrong way, he would violently hurl abuse and insults at him. And after one such an outrage, he would be terribly depressed, locking himself deep into his room.

But even when Ruyan was at a loss of how to treat his friend, he still loved him. Even when at times when Darius showed a gloomy expression, the times he would explode in anger, he loved him. He loved everything about him.

At first, Ruyan's father was worried whether or not Darius and Ruyan would be able to get along. But, in time, even his father smiled, with a hint of astoundment in it.

...You two really look like a real pair of brothers, eh?

At that time, Ruyan replied as if it came naturally to him.

"He's more than that."

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And then, many years passed.

Ruyan and Darius, after honing their skills in swordplay, enlisted for the Solta army.

Countless battles fought, countless encounters with danger, they survived through it all. And before they realized it, their war efforts were inscribed in the title of the "Four Swordsmen," enough to strike fear into the hearts of others.

They weren't children, not anymore. But when Ruyan looked at Darius's expression, he felt that he had, just briefly, returned back to those days.

"I won't allow anyone to hurt you. Not even you yourself."

Darius's shoulders tensed up with self-consciousness at Ruyan's words.

Ruyan got up. Gently, he placed a hand on Darius's right shoulder—the shoulder that wasn't injured.

"Ah, did you hear that Saris is leaving the Solta Army?"

".....Huh?"

"The war is over. He's got to go and find a new battlefield to work for, I'm sure."

"...I see."

Darius nodded.

Ruyan continued.

"But you, you still have your work cut out for you. You're not a mercenary, after all, but a pillar of Fontraile."

Darius looked to Ruyan, with a face expecting him to follow up with some suggestion or another.

Ruyan laughed.

"Which is why you need to get some proper bedrest. Now, please get back in bed, and no more moving around. Your mountainload of work isn't shrinking anytime soon."

"...Couldn't you say that any nicer?"

Darius spoke, with a sour look on his face. But he did as Ruyan said, and headed for his bed.

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Darius was recovering at a steady rate. It was fast enough to even make Felk and his foul tongue remark that he "was just like a feral animal." Perhaps it was just his natural disposition, or perhaps it was the result of Ruyan tending to his wounds.

In a matter of time, Darius was able to leave the tent, able to walk a few laps around the area.

The logging of the Billiana Forest was behind schedule. As expected, there were some complications about how to deal with the last of the Morean resistance. Even though Lestea was gone, they continued to protect the forest with utmost dedication.

Saris had disappeared. As was expected of him, once he'd properly received the compensation for all the work he'd done until now, he simply disappeared without a trace. And of course, no one knew to where.

Felk boasted that the army had "finally been purified," but, losing his partner-in-arguments, there was a tinge of dissatisfaction to his tone as well.

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Then came one evening.

Without saying a word to anyone, Darius left the military settlement.

He went into the Billiana Forest, taking along with him his most trustworthy sword, and a few days' rations of food and water. Other than that, he was alone.

Some of the Morea resistance had fled into the forest. That was the rumour he'd picked up going around some of the soldiers who were working on the logging project.

If he'd let Ruyan catch wind of this report, he'd almost certainly say not to "jump to conclusions" and stop him from going. That was Ruyan, rational and calculated.

He'd send a scouting party out, confirming whether or not they were really Morea soldiers, and if they were, to confirm which part of the forest they were hiding out in, then to make sure his own troops were sufficiently organized and armed... Everything according to the book, so to say.

But Darius couldn't wait.

Somewhere, deep within him, was a smouldering fire that could hardly light up anymore, yet was a fire he couldn't extinguish no matter what he tried.

After seeing Lestea's death, that fire within him continued to dance. Like weak, stinging embers, but a dance all the same.

At that time when he wanted to lop off his right hand, Ruyan stopped him. It was true that his persuasive words rang deep in Darius's heart, but still, but still, the fire would not go out.

He wouldn't try to harm himself any longer. But, if that was the case, then he had to find another way to put it out.

Solta and Morea. Within their never ending war, Lestea setted things in a way only she and she herself could do.

So then, it was up to Darius to settle things in a way only he and he alone could do. As long as he couldn't do so, then his own battle was far from over.

This was his choice of action, to do it alone, after a long bout of thinking. He couldn't ask Ruyan nor Felk for help on this.

Darius continued into the forest, spurred forward by something deep within his heart.

What it was in his heart that pushed him forward, he didn't quite know.

With no one to judge him, he stepped into the forest.

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Just a few paces in, the air suddenly chilled down.

And it wasn't just because the sunlight couldn't get through the thick foliage. Within the forest, the brisk air was like a continuous cycle, stealing away any hint of excess heat.

Darius stopped, and gently rapped his hand against a tree.

The bark felt rough, normal, like any other tree would be. But, the sap that flowed from within—he could sense something in it. Like it was living.

The Billiana Forest was, to Darius, the source of all his bitter memories. At the same time, he couldn't help but feel that there was something to this forest. Something nostalgic to him. He wasn't alone in this, either. It was an emotion that anyone who lived their whole lives near the forest would feel.

The Billiana Forest had always, always been here. Even before people started to count time. Looking down on the impoverished masses, the ever-growing masses of foliage, the inescapable sound of rustling leaves.

How feared it was, yet how gentle, too—a contradictory existence much like the gods. That was the existence that the Billiana Forest had.

Every single person who lived on the continent of Edinbury could never escape the Billiana Forest. But in reality, the meaning behind that was two-fold. It was predestined that no one could live beyond the impoverished reality that the Billiana Forest brought forth.

No one could escape the desolation cast by the hazy shadows of the Billiana Forest.

How hated, how loathed, and yet all at once nostalgic. The Billiana Forest was undoubtedly, to the people of the continent, an existence much like a hometown.

Darius made his way further inside.

Deeper into the forests was much, much darker than anyone could have imagined. Even when the smallest bits of sunlight made its way through the sprawling treetops, the way forward became dimmer and dimmer still.

Even so, the forest itself was brimming with life. The sound of birds and animals rang throughout, clamouring with noise.

As his eyes got adjusted to the near-darkness, he could notice strange-looking insects swarming between the gaps of dense vegetation. And at times, the birds flew so close to the ground that Darius could feel something just graze his head.

Darius was supposed to be here, chasing after the remnants of the Morea army. But, on several occasions, even he forgot that that was his objective.

When he reached the end of his stamina, Darius would rest against the roots of a nearby tree, taking a break. He'd take a drink of water from his canteen, biting into a handful of biscuits.

He listened to the sounds of birds faraway, letting his body go limp for a moment, taking in the comfort of the forest. Almost as if the forest would take him in entirely.

No. He couldn't let himself get caught under the forest's spell.

Telling himself that, he would stumble up to his feet and keep going. But, it only took a little while longer until he could no longer fight the exhaustion and had to rest again. And this time, it was even harder to get back up.

His eyelids, unconsciously getting heavy, nearly half-asleep. He wasn't even sure of the length between the bouts of sleep his body convinced him to take, but he would snap out of it at the sound of a high pitched bird shrill. And again, he would stumble up to his feet, and keep going.

As Darius repeated this cycle over and over, he found himself traversing ever deeper into the forest. He trudged further and further in. Much more than he even planned to.

He did not once encounter a single Morea soldier. Not a single voice nor footstep did he hear. There were signs of something having passed by, areas of trampled grass he did see, but whether they were from a Morea soldier, or a Solta soldier investigating the forest for the sake of the logging project, or even an animal, he wasn't able to tell.

He kept going. There was nothing else to think about. He kept going.

Just how much time had passed since he began walking. He didn't know. Maybe a few days. It had to be a few days by now. Ruyan and the others had to be concerned by now. Probably searching high and low for him.

Darius just kept going. As if in a dream. As if sleepwalking.

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And then, it appeared.

Above his head, the tightly woven layers of leaves suddenly unravelled to a clearing.

Sunlight suddenly came through the trees. The way it sloped down, he surmised it was a little past afternoon, going into the early evening hours of the day.

Darius rubbed his eyes.

In front of him was a single, huge tree, rising up from the ground.

It looked different from the trees surrounding the area. He could feel an overwhelming presence emanating from it. Its trunk was huge, its branches sprouting ever up and outwards, covering a huge expanse of the sky. Its roots were just as thick, raising up the earth above it. As for its leaves, they were so green, so vibrant, that they made the surrounding foliage look pale in comparison.

Those incessant chirpings from those birds had died down all of a sudden. The shadowy figures of the wild animals, the insects, they all stooped down low. It was almost as if the tree's surroundings were a throne. So sacred that no one could get any closer.

And undoubtedly, the tree was their king. Darius could instinctively tell that this, this Billiana tree was the very thing at the centre of the world.

Darius stood still, for a moment. Like he was caught in the overwhelming pressure of the tree, so strong that not fire, not wind, could overpower it.

Finally, breaking free of the tree's overwhelming spell, he took each step, slowly, resolutely, towards its base.

In his mind, he recalled the legends of the Rieubane Empire once more.

Long ago, it was an empire that boasted its prosperity. But in their arrogance, they committed a sin, to control the Billiana trees, that which was the Mother of the world[7], as property of their own. What they did invoked the rage of the heavens, and in one night they all but disappeared.

Darius scowled, looking upon the giant tree.

From time immemorial, that tree must have been there, as the king, ruling over everything.

Sapping up life from everything and anything.

Laughing down, watching people, like they were ants.

Ensuring they followed the destinies decided for them.

All of a sudden, Darius realized he had his hand on his sword, strapped to his waist. He didn't even know when it happened.

He pulled it out. The moment his eyes caught the light hitting the blade, the smouldering fire within Darius's heart suddenly caught flame and lit ablaze once more.

And then he realized.

The enemy was not Lestea.

It wasn't Morea. It wasn't even the assassins who had killed his family.

The thing that had played with Darius's fate, his life, the real source of what he should've been directing his hate towards. It wasn't a battlefield. It was here. This forest clearing that looked so peaceful at first, this forest that could be seen from anywhere in Solta.

He felt hatred. But not like the embers that had eternally smouldered within his chest. It was a transparent, cold, ice-like hatred that he had kept frozen all this time.

[7] TL note: not to be confused with literal Mother of All Things - different kanji but probably the same thing

Darius readied his sword, gripped tight in his hand. With a shout, he raised his sword, ready to strike down.

The sword's blade struck the bark of the Billiana tree, carving into it slightly. And then -

The world burst open.

Darius was enveloped in a dazzling white light.

He couldn't even open his eyes, shielding himself with his hands as he stumbled over.

Even behind his eyelids was an explosion of colour.

Even though his eyes were closed.

He could see it. Darius was completely caught within a tremendous torrent of light.

Within that torrent of light, he was being swept every which way, shaken to his very core. And then he remembered something. This felt so similar, so reminiscent, to something he had experienced long ago.

That fateful day. The moment he thought he had killed Sharline.

How the Crest burned hot, illuminating the entire room with light.

It was just like back then.

No, more than that, much stronger than that, did a power begin to fill up within Darius.

Then, he realized. It wasn't just the heat that emanated off the Crest. The Billiana tree, too, as if responding to the power of the Crest, began to shine brightly, too. The bark, the branches, the leaves, everything. As if the tree itself became a brilliant crystal made of silver, it radiated a dazzling light.

...Were they resonating with each other?

Darius's eyes opened wide in shock, looking upon the Billiana tree. The shining light of the Billiana mixed together with the light of his Crest, only growing in their strength together. And as if the Billiana tree itself bestowed part of its power, Darius's body, too, became hot.

...Sharline.

As Darius closed his eyes, that name escaped his mouth, soundless as it was.

Why he called for that name, not even he knew. For so, so long, he had sealed those memories away—but now, the gentle visage of her face appeared brilliantly within him.

Sharline smiled, with a smile that beckoned to him.

And then suddenly, Darius toppled to the ground, as if struck.

His consciousness went somewhere very, very far away.

At his last moments, he felt as if he was within a hazy dream.

...So, this is the destiny for those who bear the Crest.

He had no more regrets. For this was it. This was how he would decide to settle things, in a way only he and he himself could do.

Sharline was spinning, leaping, as if she was as light as a feather. All the while dancing with a bright smile on her face.

To the girl within his dreams, Darius faintly smiled back in return.

And in the next moment, everything went dark.

LIVE RUYACTION
DARIUS WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU ?!!?!?!?!!!???!!

A special postscript conversation between Masanori Takeuchi and Mie Takase[8]

The truth behind Evergrace will all be revealed...

Evergrace - Those who Bear the Crest has been a prequel that introduces Darius's achievements as one of the Four Swordsmen of Solta, going on into the conflict between Solta and the opposing Morea army. Now, we'll present a special postscript conversation with "Evergrace" producer Masanori Takeuchi[9] at Fromsoftware and the author of this book, Mie Takase[10]. Please enjoy this discussion about Evergrace, both the game and this light novel, to enjoy both much more.

"The Crest has two meanings to it." - Takeuchi

Editor: To cut to the chase, shall we hear your feelings after having read through the book?

Takeuchi: Hmm, well, this is a prequel that Takase-san has authored, and though I had created the world that the game takes place in, there are many things in the light novel that I hadn't thought about before. With that in mind, it was very exciting to read through it all.

Takase: Thank you very much.

Editor: Well then, could you speak to the things you hadn't thought about before? (laughs)

Takeuchi: Well, I certainly had the big picture of what Evergrace was going to be in my head. But it's the concrete details that I hadn't thought about. I had thought about the "Four Swordsmen of Solta" and about childhood things and all that, but if you asked me about any details, well... That's why having this light novel created feels like my rough ideas have been summarised and conveyed into a story.

Takase: I was thinking of this a bit while writing, but Darius and the others are from the unified coalition of Fontraile - so why are they specifically called the "Four Swordsmen of Solta"?

Takeuchi: Well, that... It's because the Solta army had been there at the very start of Fontraile's creation. To repeat what's in the game, there were four villages, and of those four were Solta and Morea and their ongoing conflict. The other villages weren't involved in this. And as the fighting continued, there were people in the Solta army who were particularly

[8] I absolutely suck at translating interviews. Though it has been proofread, take things with a grain of salt.
[9] Masanori Takeuchi-shi (respectful pronoun)
[10] Mie Takase-san (well… you know)

strong, and were deemed the "Four Swordsmen of Solta". And as their efforts continued, Solta was able to gain the support of other allied villages. Perhaps it was someone like Ruyan who was able to act as an intermediary between villages. They started off connecting with villages through things like military alliances, which then led into the creation of Fontraile itself.

Takase: Ohh, so it's like that... (laughs) And regarding the Crest, do you have any details regarding the truth of what it really is? It was somewhat vague in the game, after all...

Takeuchi: To me, the idea of the "Crest" is part of every theme that permeates Evergrace. In this world I've created where Crestbearers exist, they are much like the role of "witches" as in the time of witch hunts in the Middle Ages. Are they people who bear the Crest, or do they bear a symbol for scapegoats of a society that's told them to be scorned and hated? Right? It's those kinds of differences in values and the misunderstandings they bring that form the foundation for the themes of the story. So then, the Crest has two meanings to it. In the game and light novel, it's known as an existence that is scorned and hated. The second meaning is that it's a mark for those who can hear the higher calling, the calling that is the voice of the Mother of All Things, the force that controls the workings and flow of the world. So, the Crest is proof that they have this power within them. And this power affects no one else but oneself. But it's those other people who assume that Crestbearers are the source of all evil. And they keep on assuming, keep on creating rumours, and suddenly what was once whisperings becomes the truth. And that's what the Crest is like. Though these Crestbearers have done nothing wrong, once anything happens, it ends up being chalked up entirely to them. People are trapped in that way of thinking. It's prejudice.

With Evergrace 2 announced for development, Takeuchi is currently planning out the story. Takase said she "wasn't good with photos," so we brought Sharline out for her.

"The world was solidly built, so it wasn't difficult to write about." - Takase

Editor: What was the experience like to write this story to act as the backstory for the game? Was it difficult for you?

Takase: Ah, well, writing the story was actually quite easy. There was the Crest, there was Rieubane, all these elements that served as the backdrop for the main story were easy to grasp.

Takeuchi: Yeah, even though this was a prequel, you managed to incorporate all the key points of "Evergrace" (laughs). "Rieubane," "Crest," even "Palmira Armaments" and the such, you got them all in here. I was amazed.

Takase: Although, I do feel like I was a bit heavy-handed on the inclusion of "Palmira Armaments" (laughs). On a related point, how did you feel about the inclusion of the Four Swordsmen? Did it fit the idea you had in your head?

Takeuchi: You fit my ideas to a T. Actually, regarding Saris, I hardly had any ideas for what he'd be like. In fact, I wonder if the light novel helped solidify him more (laughs).

Takase: When I was introduced to the characters and setting to work with, I took one look at him and thought "oh, this guy's pretty awesome." (laughs)

Takeuchi: When I was designing the world, I purposely left details about him empty. You know, so I could fill it in later to be consistent (laughs). Out of all the characters, Saris is certainly one that got this treatment. But others like Darius, Felk, and Ruyan were much more thought out. Ruyan particularly, I spent a lot of time making sure he was to my imaginings, and he came out to be quite the amazing character.

Editor: Regarding Lestea, the heroine (?) of the story, why did you make the antagonist a woman?

Takase: Well, there's already just so many men in this story already, like the Four Swordsmen (laughs). I really did want to have Sharline have more of a role in the story, but at that point in the timeline, she's dead, right? So with that, I wanted another female character to appear in the story.

Takeuchi: Oh yes, I wanted to ask, did Lestea really have the Crest? When I first read through it, I thought that she did, but after really thinking about it, there's nothing that actually proves that case.

Takase: Well, I wonder. There's not a lot of people in Evergrace that bear the Crest. I'll let the readers decide who does and who doesn't.

Takeuchi: Oh yeah, regarding the library scene, why did Saris let Lestea go like that?

Takase: To serve the story, I guess (laughs).

Takeuchi: I've been putting myself in his shoes and thinking about it myself. The first time he met Lestea, he bluntly refused her request, so I thought his change of heart might've been to make up for that. I thought that might be a possibility, but after having read through it all, I thought "hmm, Saris isn't that kind of person, is he..."

Takase: Ah, well, but I thought at first that Saris would actually be quite fond of Lestea. But as I kept writing, I started to think that maybe he wasn't that kind of guy either. The scenes where he meets Darius and Lestea could've gone a few ways. He was talking about how similar the two were in the story, wasn't he?[11]

"I think I'd love to try writing a story for a game as well." - Takase

Editor: Takase-san, did you have to play the game a lot for this book?

Takase: Yes, and I enjoyed it. In fact, I think I'd love to try writing a story for a game as well. But it isn't as easy as you'd think. I suppose I'm suited for novels after all.

[11] i still don't get this but it's fine

Takeuchi: I can understand that. When I was still in school[12], I tried my hand at writing novels, and it's an entirely different thing than writing for games. I'm definitely more suited for games, I think (laughs).

Editor: Could you speak to what exactly is different?

Takeuchi: There are many things that make up a novel, and a writer is able to weave those elements together into a coherent story. But when it comes to games, a developer can create as many elements as they like, but in the end it's up to the player to connect the dots between them all. So in that way, it's entirely different. In the light novel, there's a scene where Darius and Ruyan drink tea together, and the lasting impression it gave me is something that you can only do in a novel. That kind of calm, gentle scene setting the undertones of a difficult conversation. Sure, I'd personally like it, but for most others, it's a useless scene to include in a game. And furthermore, it would break the flow of gameplay. So, in the case of "Evergrace," such a thing would be out of character for the game's direction.

Takase: In that case, were there any scenes from Evergrace that had to be cut?

Takeuchi: There were. For instance, we know that Darius went to Rieubane, but in reality it was Sienna [13]who had called him there. In Sharline's intro, I thought that she might speak more to Darius and his Crest, but the intro would end up being too long, so it had to be cut. Well, I'm sure people playing got the gist of that scene. The kind of people who'd read between the lines when they're reading a book. Or at least, I'm definitely that kind of person. If I get the chance to read between the lines of something, I'll happily take it...

Editor: If you say that, then doesn't this light novel fill in the gaps of the game's backstory?

Takeuchi: Well, yes. It's provided a properly illustrated backstory for the game. To tell the truth though, having read the light novel has been a delight for me. When I had created the story for the game, I'd poured in everything I could do at the time. But having someone else write a story, in a completely different medium, it brings to light the things I wouldn't have thought of, or the things I didn't know, all for me to see. Being able to see things like I didn't before is extremely thrilling.

Editor: So then, is it OK for this to be considered the official backstory to Evergrace? (laugh)

[12] 学生 - student (esp. a university student)
[13] This one is a footnote from the book itself. "Sienna is a character from the game that was initially introduced as having rescued Sharline. In the game, she has the role of leading Darius forwards. And just like him, she also bears the Crest."

Takeuchi: Sure, it's okay with me. It is truly a wonderful book that you have written. It made me very happy.

Takase: Thank you very much.

Takeuchi: In fact, it was so fascinating that it took me just an hour to read through it all. Usually, it takes me longer to read through a book. But before I knew it, I was on my second read through. (laughs)

"We're making a sequel, but who shall be the main character...? (laughs)" - Takeuchi

Editor: Oh yeah, I've heard that a second game is slated for development now, isn't it...?

Takeuchi: I'm in the middle of other work right now, but planning is in the works. Tentatively, we're planning for the main character to potentially be someone from the light novel. In fact, we don't even know if the title will be "Evergrace 2" or if it'll become another name entirely. Evergrace's title is closely linked to its themes and story, so there's a possibility that the second game title will follow suit as well.

Takase: Does the name "Evergrace" have any meaning behind it?

Takeuchi: "Evergrace" is made up of the word "Ever" and the word "Grace" combined together to create a new word. "Ever" means things such as perpetuity, eternity. While "Grace", if you look it up in an English dictionary, you'll see that its fourth or fifth meaning means "to be favoured by god." And then there's another definition by the lines of "elegant and graceful." These two definitions are the foundation. To be honest, the existence known as the Mother of All Things ended up not having such a large role in the game, but when we were deciding on the game's title, we were imagining for her to be much more important. And so despite the game having changed from how we envisioned it before, those two meanings were put in place, and the game was still built loosely reflecting that kind of meaning in it.

Editor: Will 2 be a little different from this, then?

Takeuchi: Yes. The general presentation and the setting will be the same, but the themes and concepts will be different. Basically, you can call it a different perspective.

Takase: Hey, you just spoke to the possibility that someone from the light novel might be the main character, does that mean Saris is a candidate? (laughs)

It's not Sharline, it's Takase-san!

Takeuchi: Well, um, we're still in planning, so there's really nothing I can say for sure... But in the case of Saris, he's spoken of as a foreigner both in clothes and where he comes from. And as a mercenary, with a very lightly established backstory so far, it would be really easy to write a story for him. This time, we're planning for the story to take place in Edinbury itself, and we want to be careful in what we reveal about its world and the lands, and there's so many ways to do that...

Editor: And Saris doesn't have the Crest either.

Takase: Oh, well, how about Darius's father? How'd you feel about "Evergrace 2" ending with him getting murdered?

Takeuchi: We're not doing that. (laughs) If we were to make a story about Darius's father, it'd have to be a story from when he was younger at least. Though in this time and place, the Crest is scorned and hated, perhaps a story with Darius's father might have to do with how he, as a Crestbearer, becomes a hero that's admired by everyone. That's another way to show how the Crest can be portrayed, as well. But to reiterate, "Evergrace 2" is just barely taking off from the planning stage, and nothing is set in stone yet. Please continue imagining how it'll turn out and look forward to its release.

Takase: Yes. I'll look forward to the sequel with Saris as the main character (laughs).

Editor: We'll also be looking forward to the sequel. Thank you very much for your participation today.

(Recorded in Tokyo, June 2000)

Translator's afterword

We made it, everyone! *Evergrace - Those who Bear the Crest* is complete! Thank you to everyone who helped provide insight, proofreading, and support into this translation. I'm very proud of the work that went into this—in a different way than the novelization by Kaeko Shimomura, you know? The novelization was like a three-legged race, one that I'm just proud that I made it through. And it basically fulfilled all my wishes with its super-guilty pleasure (?) story too. But Mie Takase's light novel feels more sombre, more to do with the realities of war and poverty, and hopefully, my improved translation effort shows that difference. I hope to get the novelization up to this kind of quality but uhmm, we'll see.

Major thanks to Saria who had 4 whopping proofreading sessions with me just to get this light novel into a more polished state. I couldn't have done it without your help and our back and forths on grammar. EVERYONE SAY THANK YOU SARIA!!!!!! And thank you to Saria's mom who thought the writing was sloppy. But Saria backed me up—this is our generation's vibe. The chuuni.

I love how much this light novel delves into Darius's childhood with Sharline and Ruyan, and how their relationships contrast and relate to each other. Sharline and Ruyan might be similar, but the way Darius treats them both is understandably different. How does Darius see Ruyan...? There are hints of casual joking, and a sense of trust, yet at the same time... There is such a deep wall between them, even by the end when Ruyan's words get to Darius. Or was the call of the forest just that much stronger?

Of which, the final scene in which Darius is almost... Entranced by the forest, walking further and further in without hardly a sense to stop and rest... That is so real. I spent an entire day working on translating that scene with very little breaks, almost as if in a trance. I just wanted... To see the ending so badly... My hands suffered badly for it a whole week afterwards, so rest assured that won't happen again! HAHA!!! I loved the imagery of Sharline dancing, twirling, though it confused me at first. I suppose that is just how Darius sees her (as my friends pointed out). So, I hope my drawing of the two dancing together feels like a natural extension of that.

I'd like to be clear that the scene where Ruyan "loved everything about Darius" is just a simple 好き, which is the most, you know, boilerplate version of "liking someone." Why use love instead of like? Well, in Evergrace by Kaeko Shimomura, I also kept 好き as love when

Sharline said that Darius was the one "she loved the most in the village." I think this keeps things equal between the people who love Darius the most in the world. Although, with that line where Ruyan says "[Darius] is more than a brother to me"... Uh? Ruyan? **Are you? 🏳️‍🌈?** Not to downplay some hierarchy of familial love and romantic love, but... Hm? Mie Takase, I know you like subtext in your other writings, so... Ruyan, it's okay to love Darius, but you can do better than a man who ditches you (and ditches Sharline too)...

A few words on 好き and 大好きな too. The line "the Sharline he loved" is an interesting one in Japanese and was a little hard to translate at first.「大好きな、シャルアミ」is more directly, "beloved, Sharline." The interesting pause with the comma didn't stay, sadly. I can imagine Darius's stream of consciousness here broken for just a moment. And I couldn't quite get the extra emphasis of 大好き in there with "love" already in use for 好き, but I think the line came out pretty well nonetheless. If you want to discuss with me on how to make this line better I'm all down for it. Ahh, Sharline line, beloved Sharline line...

Lestea was such a great character that it made Darius all the harder to root for. I wish she had been in the game. Mie Takase presented her backstory so frankly, without bias as the antagonist, that if she and Darius had swapped places it would've been not much of a difference. And it's not that Lestea didn't have friends, honestly. There could've been her brother, whom famine took. Gastall... Uh.... Maybe not him. (Also I translated his name wrong for half of the time working on this thing I called him Castell LOL) And her subordinates, her fellow soldiers, who looked down on her originally for being a woman. Darius had a place to go after his family's death. Lestea had no one. I think that class and sexism is something that separates Lestea and Darius, and that's not mentioned in the light novel, and it's what makes me root for Lestea all the more. I cried when it came to her funeral, and that she was laid to rest beside her beloved (yet complicated, murderous, cowardly, but loved all the same) father that she never even got to see after he died... How simple it was, to the point of nearly impoverished, but that her fellow comrades and Ruyan and Saris still came to send her off. It was a beautifully sad scene.

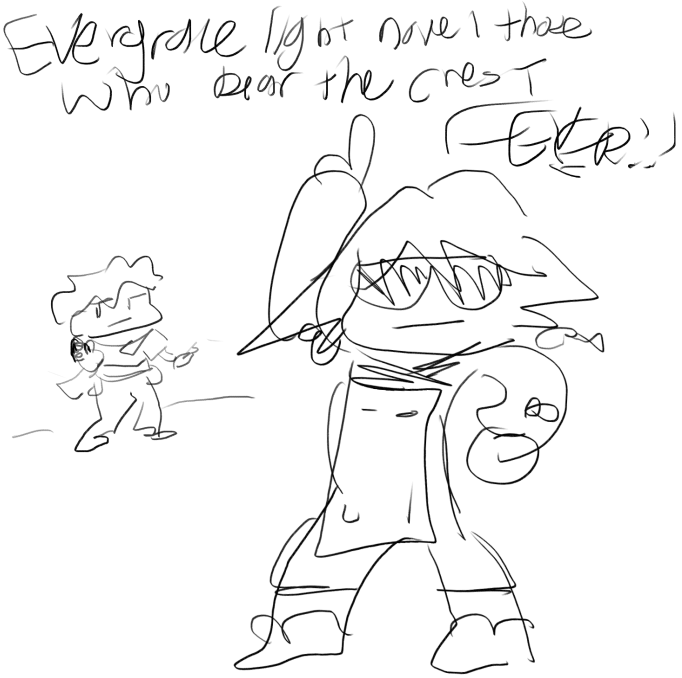
Personally, I'm still interested and confused at the last order of events with Lestea's Crest. Did she have a birthmark? Was it a burn accident? Did she burn it off herself? Did she burn it on herself? If she declares herself not to be a monster, does that mean she did burn it off? Or does she finally admit that her mark is indeed just a birthmark and that's why? Saris says that "she could believe in the Crest because of her burn mark" or "she believed in herself by burning that mark off that she convinced herself was the Crest"? GOD I DON'T KNOW IT'S SO AMBIGUOUS TO ME BUT THAT'S KINDA THE FUN??!!

For the time being, my conclusion is this and you may highlight the text to read it:

This could change like anytime though.

Speaking of scenes that kinda surprised me, the library chase between the Solta Army and Lestea. That was frankly heart-pounding and really showed the cunning smarts that Lestea had. Taking the librarian as hostage kinda sucked and I feel so bad for him, but it shows that Lestea isn't all just book smarts. Jumping through the air, evading capture, forcing herself to get used to the dark... She is just so damn amazing, man. So to see Felk burn down the library in his own frustration... Yeah, Darius and Lestea aren't the only bookworms, I got a pit in my stomach too. Saris described it perfectly, that ignorance can be weaponized in such a way. I went into the chapter thinking it might be a bit of a slog, but it was really damn good. Losing a library, a source of knowledge, all for some war is upsetting. I hope that librarian can rebuild RIP to the most tragic character in Evergrace

Hmm what else... I like how Mie Takase described the forest as this existence that was so hateful yet so comforting, there's many things in one's life that can be like that. Like sometimes it's family. Or a scar. Something's that scarred over that if it was gone you'd be thrown completely out of balance. That kind of nostalgic thing.

I'm sure I'll have more to say as I look back on this, but for now, this concludes a chapter on my life called "translating and archiving the fuck out of Evergrace supplementary material that was only in Japanese." I might come back to the novelization by Kaeko Shimomura in the future, or maybe I'll translate other interviews, but for now, I'm happy with the work I've done. And I hope that you'll have enjoyed reading it too. Oh and this translation is in dedication of all my dead relatives who died throughout the process of this project woo hoo

Lastly. Please always remember that I love Darius and Sharline from Evergrace and I want them to be happy forever. Thank you. DANCING SHARLINE